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MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"THE SUN MAID"

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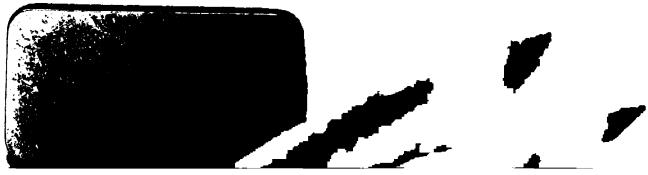

MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"ARTISTE," "BRIGHT MORNING," "VICTOR LESCAR,"
"THE SUN MAID."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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251 . e . 335 .

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	A Picnic	1
II.	Music on the Waters . .	19
III.	Levanted	36
IV.	Mrs. Raymond Paget . .	44
V.	Moonlight by the Falls . .	73
VI.	Cross Purposes . . .	83
VII.	An Autumn Twilight . . .	116
VIII.	A Highland Meeting . .	135
IX.	The Second Day . . .	162
X.	Round the Islands . . .	176
XI.	Fest und Treu	194
XII.	In Curzon Street . . .	208
XIII.	The Brothers—Gone together . .	232
XIV.	Verner's Chance	263

MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS.

CHAPTER I.

A PICNIC.

THE long pleasure-boat, with its graceful form and eight flashing oars, had made a rapid voyage, and—guided skilfully by Clare, with some cheery shouts of direction from the laird, who sat in the bows—had glided softly up to a rough little pier which struck out far into the glistening water from the pebbly beach below Knockionan Brae.

It was a perfectly delicious spot, cool and

fresh and green, yet all radiant and smiling, as the loch flashed in the sun rays and the little, bubbling waterfall sparkled like diamond spray. The bonnie braes of Knockionan rose straight up from the water's edge, richly wooded in many parts with birch and hazel and the mountain ash, with open patches of sloping grass at others, with many a huge grey moss-grown boulder rearing its rugged head, and with rich spots where the waving, large-branched fern—the Highland bracken—clustered thick and grew knee-deep amid the rocks and trees.

Upon the little pier stood a gentleman in the Highland dress. Upon the rough shore in a cool corner—drawn up, in the shade of a silvery birch—was a basket-carriage, small, rustic, and convenient for the stiff Knockionan Hill. It was drawn by a strong, shaggy pony, and arranged to hold four people, sitting *vis à vis*.

In this was seated at present, however, only one lady, watching eagerly the arrival of the Glen boat, and waving her hand with sunny, welcoming smiles to the passengers. Half a dozen dogs, of every sort and size, were capering round the carriage, and a couple of saddled ponies were held by two gillies behind.

The gentleman doffed his blue bonnet as the boat drew near, and the laird and Old George waved their hats enthusiastically, and shouted—

"Welcome, my lord, to the Highlands again!"

Clare steered with caution, the boatmen shipped their oars, and—"Softly, softly!" exclaimed Lord Arnleigh, as they touched the pier's promontory, and he laid his hand upon the bow—"Softly! Well done, Miss Clare!"

"Here we are, in force," exclaimed the laird.

"Delighted to see you," said Lord Arnleigh in answer.

Then the laird sprang nimbly ashore, and they clasped each other warmly by one hand, Lord Arnleigh holding tightly on to the boat's prow with the other.

It was dancing up and down in the long, soft waves that broke in summer music upon the shore. Miss Erskine came next, and with infinite care and most solicitous courtesy, and with many welcoming words and smiles, she was assisted ashore by his lordship, and she passed on at once, when she had returned his greeting, to where Lady Arnleigh sat in her basket-chaise. In two minutes they had all landed, and were clustering round the carriage, an eager, merry group.

"Dear! this is pleasant," said Lady Arnleigh. "How kind of you all to come!"

"I have been wishing to come for the last two days," said Miss Erskine. "I was prevented yesterday, and was accordingly quite delighted to see the signal of 'at home' to-day."

"How good of you, my dear! Will you come in the phaeton with me?"

"Certainly," said Miss Erskine; "with the greatest pleasure."

"And my dear Clare," continued Lady Arnleigh, "will you ride? It is very hot on the braes to-day, and we have a good way to go. Have you told the plan, Ernest? Have you prepared them yet for all they have to go through?"

"Not yet," replied Lord Arnleigh. "What do you say, Miss Erskine? We are talking of a picnic under the big oak on the hill."

"Nothing could be more charming!" Marion answered. "On such a day, too! What a view we shall have from there!"

"Ah! then it is settled, and suppose the ladies drive quietly up by the long road, and we shall join them by lunch-time, taking the short cut by the fall."

"That will do. But, Clare, *you* must ride, my love," continued Lady Arnleigh. "And Sir Edward, may we offer a seat to you?"

"The very thing I was fondly hoping your ladyship might be about to say," said Sir Edward, with a delighted bow. "Not," he continued hastily as he scrambled in; "not that I shirk the hill walk, I assure you, but the temptation, ladies, of such a drive, and in such society, is one I could not possibly resist."

Lady Arnleigh smiled brightly upon him as he sat opposite to her and crouched

himself up instantly into the smallest possible compass, to fit the Liliputian dimensions of her carriage.

She gathered up her reins, touched her shaggy pony lightly with her whip, and away they went scrambling up the steep, stony hill, a tall gillie, clad in grey tweed, walking solemnly by the pony's head.

The others, too, were soon under way. Clare, upon her steed, with Verner walking close by her side, with Lord Arnleigh heading the procession gallantly in the van; and Everett, with sketch-book ready, and with quick, watchful glances roaming on every side, bringing up the rear with the dogs and gillies, walking slowly along in pleasant meditation and in quiet, characteristic enjoyment.

Surely, Clare thought, in all the many years that she had known the Highlands,

there had never been such a day as this! How delicious it was in these cool, scented woods, how intense the feeling of enjoyment as they skirted the rocky corners, and wound along the deep sides of the dell; and mounted and mounted until the loch lay far below them, and the air of the upper braes blew fresh and sweet! Had summer sounds and the heather bloom and the whole glorious wealth of nature ever been so mysteriously charming as they were to-day? Or had she ever, in all her short, bright life, done anything so perfect as this was—to ride slowly along, winding up and upward, with Verner Carr walking close by her side; with his hand resting upon the pony's neck; with his dark eyes and wooing, tender smile turned constantly upon her; and with his voice going rippling on, mingling softly with the birds' song and the

bees' hum and the murmur of the water-fall—seeming ever itself to be the theme of all this summer's music and giving harmony and new mystic sweetness to the whole ?

His talk was of light things—volatile and surface talk—and difficult, as usual, to recollect or repeat. He had pleasant things to tell her of hill scrambles, such as this one, in many corners of the world. He had little anecdotes that came in gaily at every point, graceful and *à propos*. He had scraps of verse to quote to her, and bars of music to sing, and he had pretty little soft sayings to drop occasionally—just to keep hold of her heart, and to sink quietly in there; to teach the little love-lesson, slowly, but very surely, too; just to rouse feeling and interest once again if they threatened to flag; and just to keep that soft, unspoken sense alive of something indefinite in the way

of deeper sentiment, lying between him and her.

This he had been doing for many weeks past, through nearly the whole of the London season, and thus far he had gone in his wooing already, many and many a time. But Clare was satisfied, and to-day, at all events, there was nothing more in life to be desired!

Under the big oak tree, away over a sloping stretch of grass, with a glorious view lying far and wide before them, they spent two pleasant hours over their picnic luncheon that day. Everett sketched them, of course, from a bit of rock at a little distance. And the sketch is extant among them there still: with the dark background of the great tree, with its deep shadow and hoary, branching arms; with the gay, feasting party in their rustic costumes, with all their

surroundings of divers kinds—the shaggy ponies and brown retrievers, the long-haired terriers and wise-looking colley-dogs; with the grey-clad gillies grouped round a fire, which had cooked the potatoes and boiled the kettle for tea; with a setting of the fern-covered braes, and the towering crags beyond them, and the sun's rays with a silver lustre shining on the loch below.

Dear Lady Arnleigh! she was Marion Erskine's especial friend. For years she had come to Knockionan, which was a high-lying stretch of moor belonging to the Glen property, and which her grouse-loving lord rented, with its rough lodge and kennels, from the old laird. And she was almost a Highlander; indeed *quite* one, in her strong and heartfelt interest for the country and its people, and in her warm friendship for

the Erskines—from the old laird, whom she loved and honoured, to bright Éclair, whom she had known and regarded tenderly from the girl's early childhood days among them, when the old Glen had been her home.

Lord Arnleigh was a man of importance in various parts of England, where his many and large possessions lay, and in these places he lived, doubtless, with appropriate magnificence and state; but up here in the Highlands, he felt himself released from every tiresome or oppressive accessory of existence which his position made imperative for him elsewhere; and he enjoyed a freedom and quiet simplicity of Highland life, which to his own tastes, and to Lady Arnleigh's, was most attractive.

He was as rich as George was poor—and he was as simple and unpretentious in his ways of life as George was magnificent and self-

indulgent in his. The two men were curious contrasts of British tastes and style.

Lord Arnleigh affected everything Highland during the autumn months, with keen enthusiasm and zest; while the Colonel repudiated all this with scorn and depreciation, as "barbarous and insupportable to modern ideas." His London tailor made his Highland tweeds, and his French cook served his dinner often, on a Highland loch, on board *Le Plaisir*. Probably they both had some hand in affecting his views of Scotland, and tinged the light in which he looked at things; for some men do indeed suggest their cooks and their tailors, in a certain way they have of regarding and speaking of life.

It was quite evening as they descended the hill; and as the boat shot off from the pier again, it passed into a glow of colour

that came flooding richly from the sunset at the far western end of the loch.

"You will come, then, to-morrow, to dine and sleep?" called the laird, as Lord Arnleigh raised his hand from the boat's stern, and the men prepared to dip their oars again.

"And to meet Mrs. Raymond Paget," shouted the colonel, with cordiality and enthusiasm. "She arrives in the afternoon."

"We will expect you by tea-time, Lady Arnleigh," called Miss Erskine also. "You will find me under the tree on the lawn, with the tea-tray, by five o'clock."

"We will be there," shouted Lord Arnleigh, as they floated gently away.

"Good-bye, then, until to-morrow!" and off went the boat, skimming rapidly into the sunset light.

Lady Arnleigh then suddenly stepped from her little carriage, came down the stony pier, and stood watching her receding friends by her husband's side.

They watched her also from the boat, as they observed her come down for a nearer and last glimpse of them. And so I, too, like to remember her, and pause to glance wistfully back upon that recollection once as familiar as it was dear. At the portrait, with its background of sloping, fern-clad braes; with its foreground of rippling water and setting of autumn sunset glowing upon the rocks and falls. So memory colours and unfolds her portrait, as, in simple costume of heather tweed, and hat adorned with grouse plumes, in those old Glen days, she stood often there.

She was a lovely woman, although then no longer in the bloom of youth. She had

a beautiful and gracious way with her; a singularly winning smile; a manner that was composed and high-bred, and yet full of warmth and enthusiasm. She had quick perceptions of character, and she had a searching, penetrating way of looking out upon life, with those clear, bright, beautiful eyes of hers, that made people who had anything to conceal, turn shiftily away from beneath their tranquil gaze.

"Ernest," she said quietly, in a few minutes, as the boat glided rapidly away, "I do not like that Major Verner Carr."

"Really!" said Lord Arnleigh. "Why? what is the matter with him? Surely he seems a quiet, well-conducted young man."

"He is not good enough for our bonnie Glen heather-bell," said Lady Arnleigh, decidedly.

"For Clare? But, my dear, is she going to marry him? Why, this is news indeed!"

"To marry him! My dear lord, it has not come to that yet, we will hope—but I do not like the look of it at all."

"He is a handsome fellow enough," remarked his lordship.

"Yes, in a certain style. I never admire the kind of Englishman who affects that sort of foreign look myself. He might be an Italian tenor on a Highland tour, and if Clare insists on turning him into the future Laird of the Glen, Ernest—well, we will give up Knockionan, I think, if such changed times should come."

"You are looking forward a very long way, I hope, my dear, in such a picture. I cannot fancy Knockionan, to tell the truth, Adèle, with any other laird than our old one at the Glen."

"Indeed, no; but that is a dear girl, and I hope they will show some wisdom in the ruling of her fate. That Major Carr is not a nice man, Ernest, I feel very sure."

"Then I am sorry for him, my lady, for if he has fallen under your displeasure, I do not think he has much chance at the Glen."

"I cannot quite say that yet," replied Lady Arnleigh. "But I shall watch him well to-morrow evening; and if I see serious cause for it, I shall certainly speak to Marion at once. Come, it is very late, Ernest. We had better wend our way up the hill."

CHAPTER II.

MUSIC ON THE WATERS.

AS the long boat sped onwards over the loch, the soothing influence of evening upon the water fell over the whole party, and reduced them to unwonted tranquillity and silence.

Clare steered, as before, and Verner leant back in the boat's stern by her side. Sir Edward made occasional remarks in polite, suppressed tones to Miss Erskine and the colonel, and the laird guided the boat's course with instructions to Clare from the bows.

"It is magnificent!" Everett had exclaimed, with one burst of admiration as they started, and then he had sunk into complete silence, and gazed with a wrapt look in his ecstatic eyes at the crimson and amber glory in the western heavens.

The whole upper end of the loch shone and glowed with a vivid lustre, like a sheet of burnished gold; for though the sun had sunk out of sight, its glory still lingered in the western sky, and glowed in deep reflections upon the water. The twilight fell softly round them, and the music of the oars' splash and of the waters' rush against their keel, was the only sound that broke the stillness, save Verner's soft voice, as, in a low murmur, it stole from time to time upon Clare's willing ear.

"It is very delicious," he said, "is it not?"

"Perfect," Clare answered.

"The lock, as you call it, shines like an Italian lake to-night."

"We do not call it a 'lock,'" said Clare, laughing. "And I am sure it is more beautiful than any Italian lake you have ever seen."

"You have never been to the lakes, have you?"

"No," said Clare, a little absently as she bent forward to catch a sign from her uncle at the bows. "No, go on, tell me about them," she answered. "I like you to tell me about places where you have been. We are never in Italy at the season for the lakes."

"I shall like to take you there," he whispered; and then he looked away after one glance at her, as he saw she flushed crimson at his words. He was leaning back

in the boat, his tall figure stretched over the low, cushioned seat; his head bent low, and his dark eyes glowing in the soft evening light, as he raised them again and again to hers. He played with a cigarette held between his lithe and supple fingers, but he did not light it, he seemed to have forgotten it—as he talked dreamily on.

"I should like to take you to many places that I could tell of," he continued. "To bask in sunsets and dream in twilights, and roam, when the glow-worms are out, through the gardens and the Italian woods; when the moonlight is glistening upon the silver olive, and kissing the sleeping flowers."

"I know," Clare answered; "Italy in the summer-time! I believe that we, who go journeying there year after year, see little of its real beauty, because we leave before Whitsuntide. So Italians have often told me."

"I should like to pass a summer with you," he murmured, "on the higher slopes of the Apennines, or on the heights above the lakes. Who knows?" he added, "perhaps we may some day; and at all events the dream of such a bit of Paradise may at least be mine."

"I am too practical to find much Paradise in dreaming," said Clare, philosophically, speaking, without any forethought, the words as they came to her lips. And then, as he did not answer immediately, she continued, "Will you sing to me? This is just a moment for music, and if you do not find our Highland loch sufficient inspiration, fancy yourself in Italy, if you like, and sing me an Italian song."

Verner could pitch his voice to very dulcet strains. He was no great musician,

but in just such a soft tenor as Lady Arnleigh would have accused him of possessing, he could sing all the sweet modern ditties of our taste and day. He could sing, too, an Italian *pifferari* song, or chant softly a German *abschied.* And so he began without hesitation.

"Very pretty indeed," Miss Erskine said, in polite compliment when he had finished; but Clare said nothing at all.

She was listening still to the echo of his soft voice, as it seemed to die away and mingle with the splash of the water beneath their oars and keel.

After a moment, however, she recollected to say, "Thank you; I like that very much indeed."

"I am glad you do. I think we generally like the same thing. What do you think of this?"

And then he sang again, and this time a soft German *volkslied.*

"I like everything you sing," she said, when he had finished. "You always seem to know something that exactly suits the time and scene. Will you sing another?"

"More?" he answered, hesitatingly, as if waiting for her to look round at him, and to ask again.

"Yes, certainly; do go on, I like it so very much."

But she did not look at him; her eyes were fixed upon her point of guidance, far away beyond the boat's prow, upon the hill-side above. She had been forgetting her charge for a moment, and the boat had drifted a little way below its course.

"Halloa, Clare!" shouted the laird, from the other end. "Look out! put up your helm."

She sat up instantly, and moved the handle with a quick vigorous effort. Verner sat up also, and watched her with an admiring smile.

"What a clever little thing you are!" he said, in a very low tone. "But it is too stiff for you, is it not? Are you not tired? Let me help you."

And then, before she could answer, he had put up his hand and laid it above hers upon the rudder.

It closed softly over her fingers, as she steadied the helm again and brought the boat back upon its course. And she could not relax her hold, nor free her hand from beneath his clasp, for it behoved her to keep the helm firm and still.

So she remained thus, quite unresisting, for a moment, his light touch as he softly clasped her hand thrilling strangely to her

heart, and then, as she still felt his eyes upon her glowing face, and as he still kept his soft, firm hold, she turned her eyes suddenly upon him, full and steady and clear. They questioned his eager gaze, they were full of softness and of tenderness irrepressible, but full of wonder and of inquiry as well.

His eyes fell beneath hers, he relaxed his pressure of her imprisoned hand, and he turned suddenly away.

"I beg your pardon," he whispered quickly; and he bit his long moustache and compressed his lips as if with vexation and with a strong effort to control feeling that was hard to suppress. "I beg your pardon," he repeated. "I have made a fool of myself; but now and then, you know, in spite of him, things *will* get the better of a man." And he

looked round upon her again with a pleading expression, as if to win her forgiveness for an indiscretion which had been quite involuntary upon his part—and yet, it was pretty well known to most people, that if Major Verner Carr had any feelings to speak of, few men had them under calmer control. Acts of apparent impulse were with him, in truth, very generally, the result of much cool calculation and premeditated design!

Clare forgave him now, however, when she met his pleading eyes; only, as she turned her own away after she had faintly smiled on him, there was a strange, tremulous expression in their transparent depth—a wistful look of perplexity, as if she were striving to unravel, within her own heart, a skein of complex evidence with regard to something, that puzzled her and gave her some trouble and pain.

"Let us have a Highland song from you now, Birdie," called out the laird to her suddenly from the boat's prow. "Here are Donald and Hugh, quite bewildered with Major Carr's mysterious language and music. Sing them something, Clary, to bring them home again to their native wits and understandings."

Clare laughed, and glanced down the boat's length at him, across her father's shoulder and beyond the bending heads and solemn faces of their stalwart oarsmen, as they pulled vigorously on. But she could not obey him. Something rose in her throat and pressed on her wistful heart, that seemed to hush all song within her, and made her voice tremble with vibrations of feeling, at once so sweet and painful, that she felt it quite impossible to sing. Her eyes rested kindly and hesitatingly for a moment on

the grave, rugged countenance of Donald Maciver, bending to and fro just in front of her as he plied his oar. "Oh, uncle Lairdie," she said, "I can sing to you any time; do make Hugh and Donald give us a boat-song themselves now. It would be something much more original for our friends to hear than one of my ditties, which they know already well."

"Eh! you want a Gaelic boat-song? What do you say, Sir Edward? Would you hear one of our barbarous Highland strains?"

"By all means, my dear sir. Most delightful—most interesting!"

"And you, Major Carr—you will not be too cynical a critic for our native talent, eh?" cried the laird again. "We would be sorry to offend your fastidious ear."

"Nothing I should like better," ex-

claimed Verner, "unless, indeed," he added, interrupting himself, "Miss Erskine will accede to your request and sing. That I should prefer," he murmured in a lower tone to her, "to any display of native talent, even were it native to Paradise—where the warblers are the angels and seraphs themselves!"

"No, no," she murmured, colouring deeply again. "I cannot. Do, uncle Lairdie, make Donald sing us my favourite boat-song. Tell him in Gaelic, and he will do it for you."

The laird smiled, and turned with a cheerful twinkle in his hazel eye towards his big oarsman. "Donald," he said, and then a long mysterious sentence followed in that ancient language of Ossian, in the old tongue of the dwellers by the loch-sides and on the braes; in Gaelic—for the laird

held it one of his attributes as a Highland landlord to speak his people's speech—"Donald——!" But Donald shook his head.

"Na, na!" he exclaimed, with a shame-faced smile and a reddened countenance; "Na, na! te young leddy will sing te poat-song. I canna, I canna mysel'."

"She will not, Donald; she says *you* are to do it."

"Do, Donald!" Clare urged, with a bright smile of encouragement at him. "The old one, you know, that I used to like. Do, Donald! There is no one sings it so well as you."

"Na, na! There's Huishchan; he is te fine singer," persisted Donald, in sturdy refusal still. "Na, na! I canna, I canna mysel'."

"Is it me?" cried Huishchan. "And

shame til ye; and you that can tak' it oot sae weel. Luft it yersel', whativer, Donall."

"Aye, aye! Lift ye the tune, Donald, and Huishchan will be coming after ye in the moment," said the laird; and Donald, thus exhorted, cleared his voice with grim solemnity.

"Aweel, aweel!" he said; "it's te young leddy, whativer, and te laird himsel' mirover. Och! aweel, aweel!" and then he drew a long breath, and as he plied his oar he sighed. He gazed away over Clare's head, and, as a quiet silence fell upon the party, and the sweet ripple of the water sang beneath the keel, and the boat dipped and rose with an even and rocking cadence, Donald's low, deep voice rose presently along with it, heaving and falling in a slow musical harmony with the plash of his sturdy oar and the long swing of his boat.

There is no use in transcribing, in all their weird mystery, the Gaelic words he sang. But here is his music, and any one who may be gifted in that line, and to whom the sweep and swish of a long oar and the rippling of the water round a bounding keel, speak music and suggest poetry, may set what words to it they please :—

Gaelic.

CHAPTER III.

LEVANTED.

AS the boat neared the home pier they saw Charlie Keith looming, a tall, grey figure, through the twilight gloom.

"Halloa!" shouted Colonel Erskine; "so you have got home first, have you, Charlie?"

"Oh, yes," shouted the other; "I am at home."

"Had a good day?" the laird called to him as they ran up by the pier-side.

"First class," said Charlie, emphatically,

and he seized the boat's prow, as Lord Arnleigh had done, and drew it upward towards the pebbly shore.

"Here's a go!" he exclaimed presently, while he held fast by the boat, and the laird sprang ashore. "Here's a go, Colonel, and, by Jingo, a funny one! Here is Percy levanted, and Heaven only knows when, why, or where!"

"Percy! What do you mean?" George cried to him; and they all paused in their difficult journey and exit from the boat's stern to her bows.

"Percy!"

"Mr. Bligh!" said the laird and Marion. Only Everett and Clare glanced once at each other, and said nothing at all.

"He is off, I tell you!" Keith continued, as he assisted Miss Erskine from the boat. "Off! Clean gone by the steamer to-day.

And, look here, this is the only remains of him — a note for the laird, and another one, Colonel, for you. Poor Percy! he must have been in a bad way when he took to epistolary composition!"

They all paused, standing upon the pier together, and the laird read.

His was a simple note of thanks and farewell, and of rather lengthy, if quite fictitious explanations about important business, which had called Percy away, at which Captain Keith laughed uproariously.

"The idea of old Percy going in for business!" he said.

Old George's note was in a different tone:

"My dear Colonel, I have had a 'facer,' so I am making off. It don't matter, but it has smashed me up a bit; so, until better times, adoo! Drop me a line when

you come to town to Wynton's diggings, in St. James's Street. Till then,

"P. B.

"I forgot to mention that Alistair McBain and I stalked a big deer two days since over the Cluanach Braes in the early morning. We lost him. He is a royal, and is no doubt loafing about there still. I meant to have him to-morrow, but somebody had better go after him, for I don't want him now."

"Hut! tut! tut!" exclaimed the laird; a common ejaculation of his when amazed beyond expression, and perhaps a little annoyed as well. "What the deevil has taken Mr. Bligh?"

"By Jingo! I don't know," replied his brother.

"'Gad! it is most astonishing," echoed Sir Edward.

"Percy taken to vagaries!" continued the Colonel. "Well, I cannot make head or tail of it—not I! By Jove! a 'facer!' The boy cannot have been losing money, not in any possible way that I can conceive. Why, there is nothing going on that could give him a 'facer.' By George! it beats me out and out."

"I am very sorry, at all events," said Miss Erskine. "We are the losers, whatever Mr. Bligh's 'facer' has been. Some trouble, I fear, he must mean."

"Trouble, no doubt," said the Colonel. "But what the deuce can it be?"

And then they all walked up to the house together, strolling slowly over the long grass of the sloping park, and winding up the steep bank below the house, at its furthest end. And they discussed Percy and his mysterious decampment in all its

phases as they went. Verner Carr had said nothing about it, only he smiled sardonically under his long moustache, and tried to catch Clare's eyes that he might read *her* views on the mysterious subject there. And Clare had said nothing; and she had avoided his gaze, and had turned away with rather a weary step towards home. Everett, too, had said nothing, though Clare had not refused to answer his questioning look as he had stolen a glance at her, when Charlie Keith first made his announcement.

But Everett walked persistently on the other side of Clare, regardless of the impatient gestures of Major Verner Carr, all the way across the park, and up the steep hill until they reached the door. Then, instinctively, they both paused, and as all the rest went hurriedly into the house and upstairs without hesitation, to prepare for

dinner and to repose, Clare and Everett turned out again together, and walked towards the garden gate. Verner Carr glanced impatiently after them, and then he shrugged his shoulders slightly, as he followed the laird and the Colonel into the house.

"When was it, Clare?" said Everett.

"Oh, yesterday evening," she replied. "I am so sorry, he would do it, but it is worse now even than I feared. I never thought he would go off like this, poor dear old fellow! Everett, do go after him and bring him back."

"I do not think he will come back," Everett answered. "He is awfully hard hit, Clare—I am sure of that; but I will go and see after him. I will start to-morrow. The poor old boy! he must not be left to knock his stupid, yellow head against a wall by himself."

"Oh, do go, Everett! I am so sorry. Tell him—oh, what can you tell him from me?—anything that you think will comfort him or will do him good."

"I do not think anything I can tell him from you at present will give him much comfort, or do him any good," said Everett dryly. "However, *parceque c'est comme ça, Clare, qui voulez vous?*"

"Oh, Everett, I *am* so sorry."

"So am I," he added.

And then the great bell rang in the old elm tree behind the house. It was the first signal of the dinner hour; so they were obliged to hurry in together without anything further being said.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. RAYMOND PAGET.

BY the next evening the party in the drawing-room after dinner was a good deal changed. Everett was missing as well as Percy—the well-known "Erskine clique" wanted two of its most prominent members, but in their stead the party had acquired not only their pleasant opposite neighbours from across the loch, but a brand-new arrival as well.

As the summer twilight darkened in the little old drawing-room, they were all grouped together—the brothers in their

usual position, near each other upon the rug, but not, as usual, conversing together. The laird was chatting pleasantly with Lord Arnleigh, his bright smile flitting frequently over his face as he listened, with slightly bending head; and George leant gracefully against the mantel-shelf, and discoursed in dulcet tones to Mrs. Raymond Paget, who sat, carefully shaded by a crimson curtain from the heat and glare, on a small sofa by the chimney-corner.

Mrs. Raymond Paget was pretty and well-dressed, and had at all events *once* been young. She formed a brilliant and prominent object among the fire-lit group in the old drawing-room this evening.

In a low arm-chair not far from the tea-table sat Lady Arnleigh. Behind the small antique urn Marion occupied her accustomed place, and Sir Edward Hartopp stood

between the ladies, distributing bows and smiles and compliments indiscriminately to each.

A sandy-haired man of a very neutral-tinted appearance in every possible respect, sat on a chair to which Miss Erskine had politely invited him near her tea-table on the opposite side; but he did not contribute much at any period of the evening to the brilliant glow of Sir Edward's wit and pleasantry; nor would the fascinating baronet indeed have permitted any such assistance, or felt it necessary or desirable in any sort of way.

Far beyond the hearing of Sir Edward's sallies at the tea-table, or George's murmured gallantries upon the rug, Verner and Clare sat in the deepening twilight upon a broad window-sill, from whence they could see the lake; could watch the night shadows falling

softly over it, and the moon creeping silently across the shoulders of Knockionan Hill.

They were talking much in their usual strain—low, eagerly, confidentially, in murmuring accents, in softly modulated tones, with many quivering fluctuations, full of tender suggestions, in their laughing voices. They were talking what broadly might be called sentiment, pretty much their usual topic, indeed, ringing the changes upon all its various aspects and themes. And as they talked Mrs. Raymond Paget closely watched them, lending only half an ear to George's rambling remarks.

Verner Carr's finely cut profile stood out against the shadowy light, coming dimly through the window beyond. She could see how often his face was turned towards Clare, as she leant back into the depth of the window; how often he

bent eagerly forward, as if to emphasize, with impulsive action and quick gesture, his murmured words. She could not see Clare's face, as the girl leant back into the shadow, but she could detect, that the golden brown head bent often low over a bunch of flowers held in Clare's hand, and that Verner's words were heard with evident pleasure and some tremulous emotion as well.

Mrs. Raymond Paget had watched many such *têtes à tête* going on during the by-gone London season. She had watched them narrowly, and she had come down to the Glen now for the purpose of watching them still. It did not require two scrutinizing glances at Mrs. Raymond Paget to convey the enlightening information, that she had not come to the old Glen as the invited guest of either Marion or the laird.

I do not think that the laird, for his part, had ever seen such a lady before, and Marion certainly numbered no one at all like her among her friends.

She was the Colonel's guest on the strength of that imprudent invitation, coaxed out of him at Lady Mornington's ball. Why she had fished for it, and why she had come now she had got it, was a matter of much wonderment to George. That she should like a seat on his drag upon a summer's day to Richmond or Hurlingham, seemed quite natural to him; that she should enjoy a week away upon the yacht in the Bay of Nice or Naples, when they happened to meet there, was comprehensible, too; but what brought Mrs. Raymond Paget to the old Glen was more than he could tell. Verner Carr knew something about it, however, and had cursed his luck when, with her maid and footman,

and her mountain of luggage and her neutral-tinted conjugal appendage, he had seen her actually arrive, as they came home from shooting that afternoon. He had growled and gnashed his teeth with vexation, and had cursed his luck and her.

Mrs. Raymond Paget was a lady of a species that flourishes at the present time rather luxuriously, wildly, frequently, and indiscriminately, in the cultivated places of society; wherever people herd together, from causes of climate and fashion, or wherever, indeed, any sort of fun and social frolic is to be found.

She was fond of telling you, with a slight lisp and a faint sigh and a curious turn of the head upon one side, that she "lived a *great* deal abroad," and she was, by way of having slipped out of many English customs and habits, adopting sundry "foreign

ways," as people call them, instead. She frizzed up her hair in the evening, *à la Parisienne*, as she would have told you, and wore it before luncheon in an easy and becoming style as *Jeanne au Bains*. She used the term *chic* more constantly than any other word in any known language whatsoever; and she had brought to the Glen a vast supply of the tallest-heeled shoes that were ever worn on a boulevard of Paris. In them she contemplated wandering by tarn and river, over rock and moorland by light, indiscriminately of sun or moon, whenever any eligible and agreeable personage of the other sex could be induced to accompany her. In fact, that was *her* ideal of a Highland life. On all possible occasions she intended her companion to be Major Verner Carr. They had had many a moonlight ramble together before now, in many a soft southern scene.

Verner Carr had "posed" for the sort of man who "prefers married women's society" in a general way. And Mrs. Paget's pretty villa at Nice and cosy house in Lowndes Street had been favourite haunts of his. People had talked, of course, but that had done nobody any harm. It was the sort of thing for which he had always "gone in," and quite what people expected of him; and as for her—it made her the fashion for two whole seasons in London, and won her, in fact, a presentation to the loftiest social circles to which her heart could aspire! This had all begun before he had known Clare Erskine, however—two or three seasons ago; and now things were a little changed. He was very tired of Mrs. Raymond Paget, and wished for no more moonlight walks or sensational conversations with *her*. And he had set his covetous heart fast upon the

prize of this sunny, bright-eyed Clare, with her grand prospects of probable fortune and estate. He wished to be done with his old *tendresse* and flirtation—but Mrs. Raymond Paget was not so eager to be rid of him! So she had come down from London to look after him—a heroic enterprise, for she detested bracing air and mountain winds, and the whole life of a Highland home was quite unsuited to her; while as for her husband, he could not shoot a hay-stack, much less grouse!

Raymond Paget was one of those men who, by the mere fact of their passive existence in society, constitute that double nuisance of themselves and their wives. Raymond was his baptismal appellation, but, for sound and effect's sake, his wife always signed it as a double surname with her own. He was a colourless, vapid man, with some

money, few ideas, and no perceptions. He was very much in love with his pretty wife, but in a feeble, inane, inexpressive sort of way, that carried no weight with it whatever. Mrs. Raymond Paget flirted incessantly—in a tiresome, obtrusive style that seemed always to call upon the whole table at dinner, or the whole room of an evening, to look on at her—but no one ever thought of pitying Mr. Raymond Paget upon this account. On the contrary, somehow it seemed always, to every one, that it must be entirely his own fault.

There is a beautiful old love-song, written long since by that charming gallant, the ill-fated Marquis of Montrose. Sweet old song!—it is almost forgotten—but it might be read, and its example emulated, with much benefit to society in these days, by such conjugal "monarchs" as Mrs. Raymond Paget's spouse.

Alas! alas! it is all we hear from Montrose, of that "dear and only love" of *his*, so it must be feared she proved unworthy of the poem, and that he acted up to his word. I do not suppose, however, Mr. Raymond Paget ever thought of "studying after the Marquis of Montrose." He dragged about the country contentedly in Mrs. Paget's train. People were tolerably civil to him; he was an inoffensive sort of fellow, and very seldom in the way. And he knew his place, too; no man could take a snubbing better, which, perhaps, was not surprising, as he was kept in high practice in this last accomplishment, between Mrs. Raymond Paget and her friends.

The gentle hubbub of voices mingled curiously in the softly lighted room. Strange combinations of antagonistic ideas met and

clashed together in broken sentences, echoing from side to side.

"My dear Sir Edward, Miss Erskine and I are not fond of scandal," Lady Arnleigh said, in a tone of quiet dignity and amiable expostulation, in response to a *rather* highly seasoned anecdote to which that elderly courtier had given expression.

"A little more cream?—certainly, Mr. Paget," came almost at the same moment from Miss Erskine, in reply to the first sentence Mrs. Raymond's husband had emitted for a very long time. "I am so sorry," she continued; "my father takes so little cream in his tea of an evening, I am always making the mistake for others."

"The best day *I* have had yet this season," chimed in Lord Arnleigh's voice about the same time, "was upon Craigaic; we rose at least forty brace on the upper brae there,

before luncheon last Saturday morning, and nearly as many, my dear laird, I assure you, in the afternoon. I do not think that I have anything to complain of, for my part, this year."

"I am glad to hear it," began the laird; but his sentence was heard no further, for a loud, cheerful "Hah! hah!" broke from George at that instant, and the laird and Lord Arnleigh turned together to catch an echo of his fair companion's sally.

"Hech! hech!" said the old laird. "You are merry, Geordie, let us have our share of the joke."

"Mrs. Raymond Paget does us the great honour," answered George, with a low bow towards the lady in question, "the very great honour, my dear brother, of wishing to go deer-stalking with us."

"On a pony, you know," lisped Mrs.

Paget. "I know I could not walk with you great, big, huge, strong men; but I thought, perhaps, on a pony. My greatest friend, dear Lady Herbert Fitzroy, does it, I know. She rode with Jerry Falmouth on the hill last August, a whole, long, summer day, and she told me it was quite delicious. Mayn't I go, Colonel? won't you take me? No! Ah! you cruel, selfish men!"

"I never said 'No!'" laughed George again. "Only listen, Patrick. Mrs. Paget has got a hunting suit with her, made on purpose, you know; she is going after the wily stag with us, in a scarlet jacket and velvet cap, embroidered with gold, and she does not expect them to run away from her, because she means to attract them, you see, with the force of her own bright eyes. Eh! that will do, won't it?"

"You tiresome, naughty Colonel!" mur-

mured Mrs. Raymond Paget. "Now you are laughing at poor innocent, ignorant, little silly me!"

"Laughing! by Jove, no!" cried the gallant Colonel. "Not a bit of it; out deer-stalking you shall go, my dear Mrs. Raymond, as much as ever you like, too—scarlet habit and plumed bonnet, and all, and uncommon pretty you will look in it, too. By Jove! I'll uncock my rifle any day, and be your *cavalieri serventi* myself."

"You mean my bridle knight," lisped Mrs. Raymond, sweetly. "Well, if you are very, *very* good, perhaps you may."

"A bargain! We shall go deer-stalking together to-morrow," shouted the Colonel, and he laughed loudly and merrily again.

"I think you are daft, George," remarked his brother, laconically. "You may as well leave your rifle at home."

There was an instant's pause in the conversation upon the rug then, and through the silence came from the deep window the dulcet sound of Verner Carr's low, murmuring tones. Mrs. Raymond Paget looked towards him again.

"What a moon!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Oh! what a lovely, lovely, sweet-speaking, poetic, early harvest moon! I must look at it; I must, I must, I must!" And she rose quickly from her seat by the fireside, and clasped her hands together with apparent impulse of uncontrollable enthusiasm.

"Going to leave us!" exclaimed the Colonel, taking his arm from the mantelshelf. "Oh, yes! by Jove, the moon!"

"The moon—Luna, the lovely, the pure, the radiant in silver beauty!" murmured Mrs. Paget, and she turned away from Colonel Erskine as she uttered the words,

and moved with slow and tragic paces across the room. She kept her gaze fixed on the bit of night-blue heavens, high above Clare's head, as she advanced. She appeared unobservant of the presence of the two conversing on the window-sill, and seemed to threaten to walk over them, and quite on to the top of them, indeed, in her poetic progress towards the moon and sky.

Colonel Erskine gave one more short laugh, as he watched her moving away from him across the room, then he shrugged his shoulders slightly, and turned with an amused twinkle in his eyes to converse with Lord Arnleigh and his brother.

Mrs. Raymond Paget came to a stop at length in her effective progress, just in front of Clare.

Verner looked up at her, his dark eyes flashing a momentary glance of impatience and annoyance.

"Well!" he said. "What's up?"

Mrs. Paget pointed to the heavens in deprecation of his unpoetic and laconic remark.

"Oh, the moon!" he continued. "Well, we know she is there; we have been looking at her this half-hour, shining away much in her usual way, I think."

"Shining," quoth Mrs. Raymond, "as I have seen her shine on lustrous lake and soft Italian verdure, on many such a summer night. Eh! Major Carr, and you, have *you* beheld such things, and——?"

"I have beheld most things," he replied, interrupting her indifferently, and then with a cool, keen gaze, he fixed his eyes upon her face. "But *you* have never seen the moon on the waterfall here, Mrs. Raymond Paget, and that is one thing in which Miss Erskine is our superior still. She has just been describing it to me."

"As it looked the night we arrived here," exclaimed Clare, enthusiastically.

"And, as I dare say," said Verner, gently, "it is looking to-night."

"I know it is, if we could only see it. Oh! I wish we might go; but it is no use, it is too late, they would never allow us. Oh, Mrs. Paget, it is so perfectly lovely on a night like this, that grand, huge waterfall of ours!"

"Is it?" began Mrs. Paget. "I can conceive it. I can shut my eyes, so, and imagine it in all its glory, in a waking dream. Ah, Miss Erskine!" but she got no further on that occasion in her poetic strain.

"Clair! Éclair!" came at the same minute the call across the room from where the two brothers were still upon the rug.

"Are you not going to sing to us to-night?" asked her father.

"Come, my birdie, let us have some of your sweet notes," echoed the laird, and Clare rose immediately with a bright smile to obey them.

Verner would have followed her to the piano, but before he could rise to do so, Mrs. Paget had slipped into Clare's vacant place by his side. He could hardly start up instantly and leave her to enjoy the moonlight alone. There was "a past" lying between them; and, to a woman who knows how to use it skilfully, the power of the past is a very effective thing. It *must* be used skilfully, however—with coolness, self-possession, and with no imprudent revelation of any weakness of feeling, or oppressive sentiment in the retrospect. Mrs. Raymond Paget knew Verner Carr better than most people knew him, and she had enjoyed the gentle, platonic sway she had held over him for so

long, too well to let it easily slip away. She had been a help to him many and many a time; for she knew his circumstances as few knew them, and she had been a resource to him under many disappointments and troubles. In return he belonged to *her*, in her own opinion, and was not free to bestow himself in any other direction whatsoever.

She slipped into the place beside him, and in the dim light of the evening she turned her dark eyes upon his face. She laid her small white hand, with its clusters of sparkling rings, moreover, softly and caressingly upon his, where it lay upon the window-sill.

"Will you take *me* to see the waterfall, Verner?" she whispered.

"All right!" he most laconically replied.

"Do not be cross," she continued, in a soothing tone. "What is the matter with

him, eh? Have I come all this long tiresome way up into the barbarous wilds to meet him, only to be snubbed and frowned upon when I arrive?"

"I did not ask you to come," he said, politely. "I am sorry you have gone to so much fatigue and exertion on *my* account."

"Verner, Verner!" she exclaimed, in a low, full tone of pleading deprecation. "Do *not* be so nasty to poor little innocent me! *Cher ami!* What *is* the matter? Is it the first long journey we ever took to meet one another, eh? Give me a welcome, Verner. What, no! not one little, little, kindly, welcoming smile?"

"Hang it, Violet!" he answered. "It is all very well; but I wish you would not string so many adjectives together at once; it is too absolutely ridiculous. Look out! we must not sit spooning here; there is

Old George grinning at us like an incarnate fiend. Oh, yes! I will take you to the falls, if you like."

"If *I* like!"

"Well, of course, I mean I will be too delighted. Will you come down to the porch door, then, after we have gone to smoke? You know where I mean? Down at the foot of the staircase, just at the entrance to the laird's room."

"And at what o'clock, Verner?"

"Oh, as soon as you like after we have gone from the drawing-room. There is a big seat there, just under the window. You have only got to sit upon it and wait; I will come the moment I can call off. Will you? Very well, then, that will be all right, and now, look, I *must* go and light those candles for Miss Erskine at the piano. Do you mind if I leave you here?"

"Mind! oh, Verner!"

"No?—that is all right, then," he continued, quietly taking her ambiguous exclamation for assent. "*Au revoir*, then!" he whispered, and then he went away.

"It strikes me, my dear," said Lady Arnleigh that night to Marion, as the two stood together for a few moments before parting, in front of Lady Arnleigh's fire; "it strikes me, we have got some curious elements in our Glen party this year."

"Oh, my uncle goes about the world so much," said Marion; "he is always picking up some odd, out-of-the-way friends."

"Mrs. Raymond Paget, as she calls herself, is odd in her style, certainly," continued Lady Arnleigh. "But she takes care at the same time not to be out of the way in one sense, at all events. She is very

much *in* the way everywhere; go where you will in London, in these days, you see her continually; but I have never been introduced to her until to-night."

"She is not one of Clare's friends, I am glad to say," said Marion; "but I must say I cannot think why my uncle asked her here. I suppose she must amuse *him*, at all events."

"Him?" said Lady Arnleigh, reflectively. "I wonder if she came to amuse him? she seems to *me* to be a friend of Major Carr's."

"Does she? I did not remark it; he seemed to be hovering all the evening in Clare's vicinity—more, I am sorry to say, than I liked to see."

"Ah!" said Lady Arnleigh, "my dear Marion, we must prevent *that;* we must not let it be."

"Can we prevent it?" said Marion, in

despairing tones. "It looks to me as if it was coming very certain and very near."

"But has he spoken?"

"No, certainly not. I am sure Clare would have told me, and she has said nothing further about him since the night he arrived."

"But she likes him?"

"I fear so," sighed Marion.

"And *you* do not?"

"No, I do not like him. I cannot tell you why—he is handsome and agreeable and courteous; but I dislike the thought of him as Clare's husband, more than I can say. What do *you* think, dear Lady Arnleigh?"

"What I have said, my love. It must not be. More than ever I am determined upon it, now I see the state of matters between him and the lively Violet. And,

indeed, when I come to think of it, I remember to have heard their names coupled together in London. I could not recollect what it was I had heard of Major Carr, when you brought him yesterday to Knockionan. Only, when I saw him and Mrs. Paget talking together this evening, there flashed suddenly across me, the memory of a certain story that went the round last season, of an adventure after Lady Scardale's breakfast, at Roehampton. I do not remember all the details, but Violet Paget was the heroine, and I am quite sure the cavalier *was* Major Carr. It was something about a drive back to town again. Really, I forget it all. But it seemed to sharpen my wits this evening, as I observed them on the window-seat together."

"Really, now? I never even remarked they sat there. How quick you are!"

"It was only for ten minutes, after Clare had walked to the piano; but I observed them, and there was a great deal of *entretien sympathique*, I assure you. They are very well acquainted, depend upon it, my dear, and I take it as most probable that Major Carr's presence is the cause of our being honoured with a visit from Mrs. Raymond Paget here. I was wondering, indeed, what she could want with us, and what game she had really come to hunt in these northern quietudes. *We* are not in her line, Marion; depend upon it, it is Major Verner Carr."

CHAPTER V.

MOONLIGHT BY THE FALLS.

LADY ARNLEIGH might have been pardoned some small degree of complacency, over her own quickness of perception, had the inspiration seized her to stroll through the summer moonlight along the fall walk at eleven o'clock that night.

Under the shadow of the red-stemmed pine tree that towered upon the edge of the mighty precipice, along the winding paths, that hung high over the rushing stream,

came the murmuring echo of two eager voices, whose earnest and eager tones were almost drowned by the dull, incessant roar of the foaming fall.

Verner had conducted his fair poetic friend to the rough stone seat under the pine tree upon the precipice point, from which Clare had gazed with rapture, and Everett had sketched, on that first evening when they arrived at the old Glen. And Verner had dropped his enthusiastic companion rather precipitately on to the stone bench, shaking himself free, with very little ceremony, of her tender, clinging hold upon his arm.

He had smoked energetically all along the pathway from the old house, and had left all poetic ejaculation upon the glories of the night and all suggestions of sentiment to her. And now, even, he said nothing for

a few minutes, only gazed down with dark, kindling eyes upon the turbulent, moonlit river, and let Mrs. Raymond Paget murmur unheeded her soft, suggestive remarks.

Suddenly he sat down by her. "Violet!" he began; and his voice was strained and curious in its sound, as it reached her ear; low, and yet coming distinctly through the deafening roar. "Violet, you have always been an awfully good friend to me."

She answered by putting her hand out, sliding it softly into his, and by bending her head towards his shoulder, as if quite ready to repose it there, if encouraged so to do.

But Verner drew away just a very little, and leant back against the rough, jagged stem of the tall pine tree. The moon-beams fell straight across his face, and his handsome features and dark, gleaming eyes

shone in the light with a curious struggling expression of annoyance and perplexity.

"Look here, Violet, you have been a thoroughly good friend to me, and we *are* friends, you know, still—always—are we not?—whatever happens, whatever comes between?"

"Friendship is a cold word, Verner, and sometimes used to veil an icy heart, and to cover unfeeling actions. We did not talk much of friendship in Italy, did we, two years ago?"

"Two years ago! Ah, *anima mia*, how many things may happen in two passing years! I have gone many steps down the gloomy road to perdition, in the course of the last two, I can tell you. And the precipice is yawning pretty close and very angrily for me now. I am coming very fast to grief, Violet, and shall be 'done for' in

much less than another two years, unless,—well, unless some kind friend like you will help me out of the mire."

"Help you! Verner, Verner, you know me; call upon me. What would you ask me to do?"

"You know pretty well what I would ask," he said.

"Know? I cannot conceive it."

"You know that I care only for *you*, Violet; that I have cared for you for many and many a day, in the sort of way that a fellow is not likely to care for any one twice over in his life. But what can I do? I must get out of my messes somehow. A man *must* square up his accounts sooner or later, one day or another, in the only way in which it can be done,—and this is a good chance, Violet. You see what I would ask of you now?"

"To untwine my heart's fibres, to uproot my love, to darken my own sunshine, to cloud all the brightness of my own days! Oh! Verner, Verner!"

"That does not follow, Violet," he said, impatiently.

"Follow what?" she persisted.

"You know quite well what I mean," he continued. "I do not ask much of you, Violet—only to trust me, and to let me alone. It need not change anything; I cannot alter my heart's devotion, you know, or wander from the one *tendresse* of my whole history, to which I have been always faithful, even if—well, even if I have been forced to take measures for replenishing my banker's account. One need not affect the other, need it, Violet, between old friends like you and me?"

He held her hand caressingly as he spoke,

and turned towards her, bending down to look into her drooping lashes, into her tearful eyes. "You must help me, Violet."

"I help you,—to destroy myself?"

"No, no. But listen, Violet. What else is there we can do? I must live, you know. I must do the thing sooner or later. I have always known I must do it. I always told you so. It will not be worse for you now than it has always been for me, will it? I will still be as free as you have been since we have known one another at all. Will you not help me, Violet? Will you not be my friend, as you have ever been?"

She made no answer for a moment, and he waited. There was a pause. The situation was very peculiar. He was afraid of her, and felt it was very necessary to plead thus for her connivance upon his side.

There was no use trying to screen his prospects any longer, for Mrs. Raymond Paget was by no means such a fool as she pretended to be, or as she looked.

They were a quick-witted pair, in fact; and for half an hour they sat on there in the moonlight, in a frame of mind quite the reverse of the romantic, trying so hard to outwit each other; Verner striving to win the consent of his *adorée exigeante* to his matrimonial enterprise, by repeating many times the assurance that no marriage could steal his heart from her. A very false assurance, at the best of times, for, in point of fact, Verner had no heart to speak of for any one to covet or steal! And Mrs. Raymond knew this pretty well, too, but then *she* had a kind of something she called a heart, herself, and that all belonged to Verner—had been centred upon him, with all her interests

and romantic sentiments, some time ago. She could not part with him so easily as all this implied; so she set her wits to work. She made no more protests for the moment, but turned round and received his friendly confidences just as a friend. She drew him on to tell her more and more of his selfish plans and his cool, monetary projects, pretending to give a reluctant acquiescence, answering his reiterated promises with soft, passionate assurances of her fidelity and her eager concern for *him;* and plotting all the while, in her little, subtle brain, the quick, sure destruction of every plan and every scheme he was unfolding to her—only trying to see her way to frustrate quite completely his objects, and yet keep his so-called devotion for herself—how might he be outwitted, and yet such part as she might take in the transaction be concealed?

By the time she had returned to the house again, and had gained the sanctuary of her own apartment undiscovered by the late smokers in the laird's little den, she had unravelled the situation pretty completely, and knew as much as Verner knew of Clare's prospects, with all their uncertainty and curious detail.

And as she lay down to rest, and her eyes closed softly, and slumber came creeping over her little, busy brain, the last thought that framed itself, and the last sentence that trembled upon her parted lips was, "He has not yet proposed to her, and I may prevent it still."

CHAPTER VI.

CROSS PURPOSES.

So she set to work to prevent it, and after that they had rather a curious time of it at the Glen. Nearly everybody was on the *qui vive* and on the watch, except, indeed, the people most concerned, and these were Clare, George, and the old laird, none of whom had the least suspicion of the projects and counter-projects, of the schemes laid, and threatened with frustration, and the excitement which the old Erskine inheritance was causing in the minds of two or three of their assembled guests.

Lady Arnleigh detected many things, and odd little events caught her eye, which she detailed to Marion (who listened eagerly and with complete confidence in her perceptive skill) and to her lord, who listened with some amusement and a good deal of incredulity as well!

"My dear, your imagination runs away with you," he would say. "Verner Carr does not seem to me to think of much except his stalking, and, as for Mrs. Raymond Paget, really you are too hard upon her. She is an amiable little woman enough."

"Amiable!" Lady Arnleigh would exclaim, with much indignation. "My dear Ernest, how soft and how shortsighted you are! Why, she is a very vixen, and a sharp enough little woman, too, I can tell you, though it is part of her *pose*, at most

times, to pretend to be a fool. How blind you men are, to be sure, about women of that sort!"

So time went on, and the Arnleighs were always backwards and forwards, and Mrs. Raymond went out stalking in her scarlet jacket, much to the amazement of little Donald and Hugh. She flirted mildly with the colonel, made herself objectionable to most of the party, but was satisfied upon her own account, as she and Verner managed to have many stolen walks and moonlight interviews from time to time. Mr. Paget, worthy man, ate his dinner, and occasionally pretended to shoot. The brothers were, as usual, happy in their autumn sports together. Charlie Keith spent a blissful existence upon moor and hill. Clare and Marion passed busy weeks over many home interests and pursuits; and so things went

on, the party continuing unbroken, until Sir Edward went off, to keep his numerous engagements far and near—to meet the Prince at Contin, to make the duchess happy by his presence at Strathallandale, and to add his name to the list of fashionable guests at Fern Lodge.

Thus the weeks sped fast through all August and September—much as usual for all the party at the old Glen save, indeed, for Clare. She, throughout that autumn, in her bonny home—roaming every day over brae and moorland, fishing in the river, and rowing on the loch—lived through a curious, half-happy, but very troubled time, as she wondered what had come to her, as she tried to like Mrs. Raymond Paget, and struggled to understand Verner Carr.

What could he mean? she often thought. What pleasure could he find in wooing her

young heart, with tender accents and wistful glance, if he wished not to win it! And if he meant to stop short—after weeks of sweet intercourse together—stop short at unspoken vows! In her heart Clare silently detested Mrs. Raymond Paget, for although she never saw her and Verner Carr address each other in any pointed way, still Clare had a strong instinct that *all* would have "come right" by this time had it not been for her.

In fact, Verner was himself puzzled. Day by day he felt more inclined to take the final step, and to throw himself for ever at the feet of the bonnie heiress; but day after day he was deterred. The real prudence of the step still seemed uncertain. The fact of her secure inheritance, and the degree to which her future husband would participate in the full, free possession of the

property, if it were really hers, all seemed uncertain still, and it was impossible to ask questions upon the chief and most important points in the matter from anybody at the Glen. No one could be brought to volunteer the information, not by any amount of dexterous fishing and hinting on his part. No one seemed to think at all upon the matter; and no one assisted him in his wary angling for that information, which, he assured Mrs. Raymond Paget, was of little moment to him, but which really, in his greedy covetous heart, he most eagerly sought. He was quite puzzled. Was Clare really heiress, to the exclusion of her cousin Marion, or only failing her? And was Clare heiress, free from her father's liabilities, and would the property, untouched by his creditors, pass unbroken to her? Verner remained painfully uncer-

tain upon every one of these difficult points, and he feared to take any decisive or self-committing step.

Besides this, he was terribly afraid of Mrs. Raymond Paget. Nothing would induce her to go away. He had to keep her soothed, and in a safe humour by many assurances which it required deep stratagems to convey undiscovered. He feared horribly indeed that if, any sunny morning, Clare Erskine were to come down with the bright light of a new happiness in her lustrous eyes, Mrs. Raymond would detect it instantly, and perhaps interfere, even thus late in the matter, and frustrate his pleasant prospects by revelations which he felt would be fatal to Clare's regard for him for ever.

So he played his game with continued wariness, patience, and restraint, and Clare

could make nothing of him or of his curious, uncertain ways. Only, she grew more and more to look for him, and to like to see him come; more and more accustomed to his soft tones and insinuating manner, his pleasant companionship, and his continual presence there; and more and more she felt that that presence was becoming a great deal to her, something it would be very difficult to do without.

So time went on in the old Glen house with the curiously assorted party. And they rode, and walked, and boated, and shot, and picniced together, often very much at cross purposes with each other, as such groups of people, shut up through August and September, for sunshine and storm, in the shooting-boxes and old houses of the Highlands, are sometimes apt to be —very much at cross purposes indeed.

Meanwhile, of course, Clare heard from Everett Hardy. He had caught Percy, he wrote, down on the Hampshire coast, near Wynton, in a very disconsolate condition of mind, and they had gone off to Norway together, and then crossed to Denmark, and were wandering about. He did not know how long they would remain abroad, but, at all events, Clare need not look for either of them again at the Glen that year.

And even though Verner was always with her through these days, yet somehow she often missed them both—Percy's silent, faithful devotion, Everett's quiet companionship and his unfailing watchfulness and care. She missed them, and felt that the autumn, with its short moments of strong feeling and of passionate happiness, and its many weary hours of wondering,

misgiving, and doubt, was a restless and broken autumn, in which the sunshine of her serene existence was much clouded, and of which the enjoyment was very questionable altogether.

Things went on like this till near the end of September, when the last of the grouse shooting was over, and the autumn storms were coming quickly on; when the party began to talk of breaking up for the season, and Lord and Lady Arnleigh made their plans for going south.

The colonel sent *Le Plaisir* down to Southampton Water to await his orders for the winter cruise.

Major Carr became every day more perplexed, more nervous, more restless, as he wandered over the moors of a morning in little humour for sport, or strove to catch an hour's talk with Clare of an evening,

beyond reach of Mrs. Raymond's ear; and Mrs. Raymond became daily more triumphant, as she quietly watched and regarded the progress, or rather the frustration, of his scheme. For she held her ground valiantly, notwithstanding the many days of autumn rain that came down upon them; notwithstanding chilly mornings and falling leaves; and notwithstanding many weary hours of intense boredom which she suffered, in the society of every lady in the house.

Mrs. Raymond Paget felt herself misunderstood by her own sex; and thus the long, endless days, which the men of the party, with cruel heartlessness and vile indifference to her, spent upon the moor and in the forest, passed heavily indeed in the drawing-room with Miss Erskine, or in lengthy and vigorous con-

stitutional exercise over rocky paths and in long, wet heather, through which she was ruthlessly conducted by Clare. It was all most abhorrent to her, but still she held her ground quite indefatigable; and with quite irrepressible persistency, she never gave Verner Carr a chance. The result seemed to repay her. Her persevering and unfailing presence effectually stopped anything that might otherwise have taken place.

Thus Mrs. Raymond conducted herself, and meanwhile the autumn came hurrying swiftly on. Golden and amber tints were coming over the woods in the old glen; the heather was fading fast, the branching fern leaves turning a ruddy brown; the berries were ripening scarlet upon the ash trees by the river, and the rich clusters of the drooping barberry hung across the garden wall.

All the rich changeful beauties of the late autumn had come with infinite new effects of bright colouring and sombre shade over the moor and the hill-side, upon the rocky forest, and in the glen. The evenings came falling earlier every day, the "gloaming" gathering round them always as they hurried back from forest or hill; and Mrs. Paget's walk of an afternoon, with the active and intrepid Clare, became daily a drearier terror to her, almost more fearful than she could bear; yet she performed it bravely, for she could not rest at peace in the drawing-room, or drive comfortably with Miss Erskine, while Clare scoured the moors without her, even although Verner Carr was supposed to be upon the hills. Mrs. Raymond Paget's persistent valour was worthy of a better cause.

This was the exact state at which matters

were arriving, when towards the end of September the old laird one morning came down to breakfast with a new idea. His brother had been paving the way last night in the smoking-room for the announcement that had to come each year, and that each year seemed more unwelcome, the announcement that as the winter was coming quickly, he and Clare must be thinking of leaving the old Glen once more, and of wending their way towards the South. George fancied he had rheumatism very severely, and used to plead it readily as his excuse for their departure, as September came round. Late autumn or wintry weather in the Highlands would be too much for him, he reiterated afresh every year. And perhaps it might be, but there was no telling, for at all events he never stayed to try. So, as he said, they must be going, and now, as ever,

it was bitter news to the laird. He was quite well accustomed to doing without George, indeed, but he never *could* reconcile himself to the Glen house robbed of the bright presence of Éclair. And yet he would not keep her—she was "Geordie's birdie," not his; the one fair, bright thing in all "poor Geordie's" life; and as such he must not be robbed of her, though she carried off the last sunshine of the Glen house when she went away. The laird felt the prospect of that bitter parting with strange and unusual force and sharpness this year.

Thus it was that an idea came to him, and he appeared at breakfast all full of it one morning as the September days sped on—the idea that he would delay the parting just a little while, by going along with them down the loch-side to Portalloch. So far they might proceed, he proposed, the whole

party together, and remain for the great Meeting at the hotel.

Those famous days were drawing near, the days to which many a young Highland *débutanté* looks forward from very early times—the days of the Portalloch Meeting, surely the merriest Meeting to be found throughout the North; where friends old and young, from far and near, meet and join in Highland reel and country-dance together; all so glad to meet because they meet so seldom—all turning out in gay and brilliant groups, with friends from north and south, from home and from far abroad, to mingle joyously together, learn each other's dances, and share each other's fun.

There was no one in the whole party who greeted the proposal of the old laird with regard to the Portalloch Meeting with more enthusiasm than Verner. It was the

very kind of occasion for which he was waiting. He had been once to the Meeting already; he knew all the programme beforehand now: the journey, the lounge at the games, the idle hours before dinner when everybody did what they pleased; the balls, the cheery repasts together in a merry party at the hotel, the crowds, and the unsuspected encounters that took place, of friends from every part of the world. It was more than likely that Mrs. Raymond Paget would there encounter some very particular friends, much idolized and much toadied by her, and it would be hard indeed if her attention were not sufficiently carried away from him just to allow him a few opportunities undisturbed.

Up at the Glen here she was playing her game too closely for him, and the weapons that she held hid in her hands were too

dangerous to be defied; so Verner hailed the idea ecstatically which the laird proposed on that morning at the Glen.

It was a chilly morning, as it happened, drizzling and gloomy outside, and the windows on to the square roof top were closed up now, and a bright fire crackled cheerily in the fireplace beneath the huge stag's head; and where flowers and fresh fruits had been grouped, with cool and tempting effect, upon the breakfast-table a short while ago, there were now smoking piles of scones and oat-cakes, and many hot dishes of game and fish. The scarlet berries nestling in wreaths of grass replaced the rich cluster of roses and snowy lilies with which Clare had been wont to adorn the table a few weeks ago. Here, and all around outside the house, autumn was hurrying quickly on.

"I hope *Le Plaisir* has made a safe passage," the colonel had said that morning as he sat down to breakfast. "There was a pretty stiff wind last night."

"There was," said the laird. "I heard a branch break in the elm at the house end, and I have been round to look at it this morning."

"I heard it, the wind," said Mrs. Paget, with a shiver. "It was whistling in my chimney at two o'clock this morning quite horribly; I could not get to sleep."

"I like it!" exclaimed Clare, in an emphatic, rather defiant tone.

"You like a storm, my dear? impossible!" said Mrs. Raymond Paget.

"I do," persisted Clare. "It is years since I have seen one here, but I do like it. I think it is splendid to hear the wind get up and roar down the glen, and to see the

waves rising upon the loch, dashing and riding high before the storm, like wild white horses with great flowing manes. I used to delight in it, did I not, uncle Lairdie, when I was a child?"

"Yes, you did," he answered, smiling gently upon her. "You did; many a time I have carried you to the porch door, Clary, to see the white steeds prancing in the moonlight on a rough winter evening before you went to bed."

"Ah! it makes me shudder to hear the wind howl," sighed Mrs. Paget. "And really, the storm seems to be rising; how early the winter comes, to be sure, up here! I am getting quite frightened when I think of my journey south."

"It is blocked up sometimes, a little later than this, upon the Highland line," said Verner quietly, as he moved to the side-

board to help himself from some dish there, and took the opportunity to make the remark while Mrs. Paget's eyes could not scan his face. "About this time the snow begins to fall at Dalwhinnie; it is often blocked up there for days."

"Dear me! Do you think I ought to go then, Major Carr?" said Mrs. Paget, in a very soft and demure tone. She felt inclined to draw him on in his suggestion as far as possible.

"Oh, you will not mind travelling through the snow, I should think," he answered as he came back to his place again and sat down, keeping his eyes persistently, however, fixed upon his replenished plate.

"*I* not mind a journey across the mountains in the snow? Oh, Major Carr! and *you* know my extreme delicacy! You, of all people, to suggest such a thing!"

"Nothing much happens," he continued; "only you have to stay sometimes on the line, you know, between Dalwhinnie and Grantown, sitting in the carriage while they dig the trains out, perhaps for eighteen hours."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Paget.

But the laird interrupted her with a cheery laugh.

"My dear lady, do not alarm yourself. Major Carr's imagination is running away with him. We have never been snowed up in these parts, in my experience, before October is well on. The Highland railway will be open and safe for your journey, I hope, for many a day yet. Major Carr, you are a cruel alarmist. We cannot let you destroy the reputation of our Highland line in that kind of way."

"Carr is pretty right, though," said

Colonel Erskine, decidedly. "It is quite time, Patrick, we were all thinking of getting south."

The colonel was much obliged to Verner Carr for his remarks, dropped so opportunely, although so unconsciously, on the colonel's side of the argument with his brother the night before.

The laird had urged that November was soon enough for them all to think of deserting the North. And George had pleaded his rheumatism and the fast-gathering autumnal storms.

"It is time we were off," he repeated, thinking of Sir Edward Hartopp's partridge shooting in early October as he continued, "It is time we were getting under way. I only wish, my dear Patrick, we could induce you and my niece Marion to accompany us, if only for this one winter, to the South."

"No, no!" replied the laird. "My ship is too old to be got out of dock, Geordie, and Marion——" He glanced towards his daughter, and the answer came at once to him from the full, tender gaze of her clear, faithful eyes. "Marion will not leave me, I take it; I only wish, Geordie, you could induce her to go."

The colonel turned instantly with a persuasive bow towards his niece.

She shook her head at him, and smiled from him to her father again, as if the idea were an amusing one, too absurd for discussion in words. But her gaze wandered on again, when she had thus answered the two, and rested for a few moments with eager and wistful solicitude upon Clare's face. Her sweet "birdie," with her fair bright plumage and gay summer songs! How gladly would she have kept her through

all the storms of threatening winter, safe in the shelter of the warm home!

But she could not. The young wings must expand, and her bird fly gaily away. She could not keep her, still less, with watchful eyes for snare or vulture, could she follow through southern countries and southern climes her dear, bright bird in her sunny flight? She must go without her.

It was then, that morning, that the laird spoke of the Portalloch gathering.

"I was thinking," he said presently, after a minute's pause, "that if you must all go, we may as well shove it off as long as possible. What do you say, Clary? Shall Marion and I go down to Portalloch with you, and see you dance in the kilted reel once more, before you say good-bye to the North?"

"Oh, uncle Lairdie, if you only will!"

and the girl's face lit up with a radiant smile as she turned to him and answered his question with bright, sparkling eyes. "Oh, uncle Lairdie, how delightful, if you and cousin Marion only will! It is three years, you know, since we have been able to make you go with us. Oh, how delicious, if you will only go this year!"

"Why should we not?" the laird continued. "Let us go down together, and have a couple of merry days before we say good-bye."

"A capital idea!" said the colonel. "Quite right, you know; one ought to show oneself at the Meeting; quite the right thing to do in our own country from time to time."

And the colonel plumed himself as if the fact of his valuable existence was an important fact of which to afford the North country

ocular and unmistakable demonstrations, from time to time. He loved the Northern Meeting (when it suited his other plans for him to go to it), and he aired, indeed, a very grand style of Highland presence for the occasion. But he always at the same time accounted to himself and to his friends for the fact—when he was found among the gay crowd—by stating thus his sense of duty in attending periodically this great gathering of the North. "In one's position, you know," he used to say, "this kind of thing is expected of you. It pleases people; you understand, eh? Yes; just so." And with this he went often to the Meeting, and danced, too, a good deal when the fancy took him. He was proud of his reel-steps; they had always been in request at the Queen's balls at Buckingham Palace, and had been much admired. So he greeted his brother's proposal with alacrity.

"Capital idea, my dear Patrick! By all means; yes, let us go."

Mrs. Raymond Paget's felicity, when she at length understood that the Northern Meeting meant two great balls, and much smart and effective dressing for several whole days besides, was indescribable. She was very much delighted indeed. Those two lovely *toilettes de bal* from La Ferrière—which she had brought up with her, spite all her maid's expostulations, "just on the chance"—would have, then, actual occasion to display themselves; and she would be much astonished if any such other costumes appeared to eclipse them in that assembly at Portalloch. Not much danger, she thought, unless, by ill luck, any of Wörth's horrible Americans should turn up.

"Well, it is settled, then," said the

laird; "and next Tuesday we will go down. I will write to Mrs. Mackie at once, Geordie, and see if she can manage the rooms. It is late to apply, certainly, but she will not refuse us if she can do it at all."

The laird wrote his letter, and the plan was much canvassed and discussed. An express was despatched across the loch to the Arnleighs, begging them to join the party to the balls, and the answer came in acceptance; for Lady Arnleigh, in truth, would not miss being present at an occasion which she rightly judged was more than likely to result in a *dénouement* or some sort of climax to the general state of affairs.

So the autumn at the old Glen was concluded, and on Tuesday the party would all leave together.

This was the chief thought filling all their minds as they scattered over the hills and

moorlands during the next few days—filled the laird's mind, as in his quiet, self-contained way he moved about at his sports or work, and, after the first expostulations, kept his heavy sorrow at the coming parting to himself—as he felt it shadow the autumn days for him, and as he faced the winter storms that might be coming in the solitude for Marion and him. It filled Mrs. Raymond Paget's mind, as she watched more closely than ever, with a cat-like vigilance, every movement of Verner Carr. She felt satisfied as to the present. She had effectually prevented, as she assured herself, "anything that might have taken place." So in truth, she *had* prevailed—she and other considerations and difficulties—prevailed to arrest Verner's forward progress in his curious wooing, beyond the limits of strong platonic flirtations, which it had already reached.

He would not have proposed in any case just at that time, even if Mrs. Paget had not been there, but he would have gone many more stages nearer to it, and he would have utilized his time better, in gaining more and more effectual influence over Clare's mind and feelings, if Mrs. Raymond had only let him alone; but she never did so.

His thoughts, therefore, were also full of the approaching end of this Highland season, doubting much what his next step should be in the matter; still perplexed as to Clare's prospects; still uncertain as to the exact line it would best suit him to take.

Certainly to keep hold of her, to have the card safe and sure in his hand—that must be well in any case!

So, he looked forward to the Northern Meeting as a time when many little oppor-

tunities must offer of rivetting the close links of the chain he had been winding slowly round her young, unthinking heart. "To keep hold of her, to influence her, to secure her love and interest, and then to watch the fitting moment when the way seemed clear to him, and the inheritance sure, and then spring in swiftly and courageously, and claim her against all comers for himself." That seemed the line of action most favourable for him.

While Verner and Mrs. Raymond Paget, with minds full of self-interested schemes and plottings, thus contemplated the close of the Highland autumn, Clare contemplated it also, but in a very different frame. The time for leaving the Glen and her uncle Lairdie and Marion always came upon her like the re-opening of an old sorrow year by year. She loved so passionately every

corner of the house and garden and glen. She loved with such deep, clinging tenderness the two who dwelt so quietly there. She never could bear the thought of leaving them—and this year it all seemed especially hard. There were other feelings too; all her little hidden troubles and love-wonderments over Verner and his curious, fitful ways, seemed to make her cling closer than ever to her old home-love, and to the quiet sympathy and full understanding of her cousin. As she doubted the reality of this strange kind of love that she found meeting her in the gay outer world, she turned again and again to rest her young aching heart upon the sense of the sure devotion that lived ever for her at the fireside corner at the Glen.

CHAPTER VII.

AN AUTUMN TWILIGHT.

IT was the very last afternoon; they were to start to-morrow. It was raining steadily, and had been pouring the whole morning through; and Mrs. Raymond Paget felt really unable to screw up her courage for a constitutional, when Clare, in tweed waterproof hat and ulster, opened the drawing-room door early in the afternoon.

"You do not mean to say you are going out?" Mrs. Paget exclaimed.

She had really hoped that for that day, at

all events, she might relax her vigilance, and stay quietly by the fire.

"Are you going out in this pelting rain?"

"Yes," said Clare, glancing calmly towards the windows. "It *is* raining, but I must have a walk. I cannot leave to-morrow without going round the place once more. Would you like to come, Mrs. Paget?"

"I—well, really, I can scarcely brave it. How indefatigable you are! Have you no companion for your walk without me?"

"No; I am going quite alone. Cousin Marion is busy, and everybody else is on the hill. But do not disturb yourself on that account. I really shall enjoy the solitude, and would not have you come, Mrs. Paget, for the world. I would not, indeed."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Paget, leaning back

luxuriously in her low chair, and cutting the pages of her novel with a languid air. "Ah!" she repeated, disregarding Clare's polite protest against the disturbance of her comfortable repose. "The gentlemen have gone far up the glen, have they not, to-day? They will not be home until late?"

"No; not till dinner-time. They have gone to Craigarroch."

"Ah, then, really, don't wait for me. I do not think I can make up my mind to a walk. It is really too cosy in here."

"Good-bye, then," said Clare, disappearing. "Make yourself comfortable, and tell cousin Marion to keep me some tea; I will not be very long. Come, Corry, and you, Rhusachy, you come along, too." And off she went, running down the oak stairs with her terrier and the big colley at her heels.

"*Is* it safe?" murmured Mrs. Raymond Paget, as she heard the front door shut at the foot of the staircase, and realized that she had lost sight of Clare. "Is it safe, after all my vigilance? I hope I may not have been a fool in my laziness this afternoon."

It was a warm day, and the drizzling rain was falling softly when Clare emerged from the house. It was the sort of rain in which it is always better to go out, in thick boots and waterproof, than to sit disconsolate at the weather at home. Cased in her long tweed ulster, Clare cared nothing for it, and enjoyed the fresh sweetness of the air that cooled her soft cheeks as she turned up the hill.

She was going on her farewell visits to places and to pets and to people. She rambled here and there. She peeped into

the garden, and visited the kennel, and gazed for a few entrancing moments over the foaming falls. She stopped at several doors, and heard her name uttered in farewell, with many blessings upon her bonnie head. She went round every corner of the home farm, and at length, as the gloaming came creeping down upon her, she turned up the glen.

Once more she must see the river winding through Blairachan, and whisking in silvery eddies about the mossy stones. Once more she must climb up just a little way toward Everett Hardy's pinnacle, and look over the prospect of her old home from there. And so she started.

For a little way she trudged valiantly along the winding road, following the course of the swollen river, under the dripping branches of the birch and the rowan trees;

but, after a few minutes of sharp walking, she paused. She turned to the side of the road, and stood still there, for a long time.

There was a low wall running along the road-side just at this part, and she leant upon it and looked down into the rushing stream. So many thoughts came surging up within her; her heart seemed full of so many things—for she thought of Percy, too, and felt sorry for him once more—and she wished from the very depth of her heart that it had *not* been her fate to have to wound and drive away her friends. And she thought of Verner, and wondered, with a strange, unanswerable wonderment, why he (who never seemed to love and long for her as Percy had done) should have won such a curious power over her heart and fancy, that his face and voice and

manner never seemed for one moment to go away.

And as she looked down into the water and watched—with a curious fascination, as she had often done when a child—the bubbles rushing past her, eddying and whirling upon the bosom of the stream, she wished that the old, old days could be again, before she knew London or any other distant life—before Percy, or Verner, or all the confused feelings and influences of her present existence had come upon her—the old, old days, when all her heart was here, without any prospect or any wish to go away. Yet, her life bereft of Verner? —it seemed difficult to imagine it now.

As she stood there, the evening shades came falling, the rain stopped also, and the wind came whispering softly among the rowan trees; and it must have been the

breeze rustling among the brown leaves that hung low above her that prevented her hearing, when footsteps, falling certainly with a light and wary tread, approached very near her. She heard nothing, her thoughts so completely absorbed her; and so it was, she started, when some one touched her lightly, and she turned to see a pair of grey-clad arms resting on the parapet beside her, and to meet Verner's eager eyes and dark, expressive countenance turned towards her in the soft twilight.

"I have not walked down the glen for nothing," he said, gently; and then—"Where is Mrs. Raymond Paget?" he added, with a little, curious smile.

"In the drawing-room, reading a French novel by the fire," said Clare in answer, lowering her voice almost to a whisper, as if she feared instinctively her words

might reach that lady's most vigilant ears. "She would not come out this afternoon."

"How right of her!" said Verner, springing upright and laughing aloud. "I never knew anything so sensible in my life, and so now, just for once, perhaps, I may have one little bit of walk with you."

"Without even asking Mrs. Raymond's leave," responded Clare, with a bright, happy smile.

She was so truly pleased in her foolish young heart, to have him quite to herself, if only for this afternoon.

"Yes, yes," he exclaimed brightly; "without any leave from her. How nice of you to come out, and what a lucky instinct it was of mine! I jumped out of the dog-cart at the turn up to Blairachan; the laird and your father have gone to visit old Macdoil."

"What! you all stopped shooting so early?"

"It was so horribly wet. It was quite impossible to get along on the high moor, and we have made a very fair bag; we all proposed coming home after lunch-time, and I had the blessed inspiration to walk most of the way."

"And now you want to go on to the house, do you not?" said Clare, in a pleasant, genial tone. "In fact, I know you do. Come, I will walk back with you; you must be tired, and longing to rest and change."

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Verner. "Back to the house, *now*, to Mrs. Raymond and her French novel, when I have just met you, and thought you were going to take me for a long, delicious walk!—why, how can you suggest such a thing? See,

the rain is quite over. No, no, not for ages and ages—do not let us go home!"

Clare laughed a bright, merry laugh, with a ring of joyous pleasure in it, as he reiterated his appeal.

"But I was quite sure you wished to go," she said. "I know you must want some tea."

"Oh, bother the tea!" said Verner, emphatically. "Don't let us think about it for a moment. Come, Miss Erskine, it is the very last evening; let us go for a regular good walk?"

"But it will soon be dark," said Clare. "However, if you like to go with me, look, I did mean to climb a little way, just a very little way, up the path on the hill. Ah! the last evening! Yes, I have been thinking of it all the long, sad afternoon. I never can bear the last days here. I never

can understand, when they come again, why it is I ever do go away."

"And I, too, have been thinking that it is the last evening," said Verner, as he turned and walked slowly beside her up the rough winding pathway to the hill. "I have been thinking that it is the last evening, and counting over the happy days since the first evening began."

"I am glad you found the days pass pleasantly on your first visit to the Glen," said Clare. "Perhaps," she added with a little hesitation, "perhaps you will come back again."

"Pleasantly! that is not at all the word," he replied. "I have been dangerously happy. Come back again? Oh, Miss Erskine, that is a question you must ask of yourself, not of me."

"I answer it to myself in asking you,

Major Carr," she said, flushing a little in the twilight, as she had often done before now, when she made these ambiguous remarks.

"*Do* you ask me?" he continued.

"I think I have done so," said Clare.

"If I thought you wished it—," and then he broke off his sentence and paused a moment, beginning again, however, before he gave her time to reply. "If you only knew, Miss Erskine," he hurried on, in a tone of suppressed and passionate feeling, "if you only knew, how I wish that I were worthy, that I could feel myself worthy to—to—to—come."

"Why should you say so?" she answered in a low, quivering tone. His eagerness unnerved her, and she scarcely knew what she should say in reply; how much she might let him know that might be helpful and

encouraging to him, or how much she must zealously conceal. "Why should you say so? If I wish you to come, why——?"

"Why? ah! why?" he broke in, interrupting her; "why? Again and again, indeed, the question echoes in my heart. But, ah! dear Miss Erskine, how little do you know of the winding and darkened path of a career like mine! In your bright, pure life what is there that could ever teach you to know my deep unworthiness to be your friend? And yet the sweetness of your friendship to me is more than words can tell."

"We have always been good friends, I think," she answered, with a curious echo of some unuttered feeling in her tone. "I have always considered you, Major Carr, as among my friends."

"Among many," he said, rather bitterly. "So *I* have been to *you*, and while *you* to

me—— Ah! Miss Erskine, if you could only know the weariness of a long, wasted life!"

"Not so very long, after all," she said. "And we will hope, with the brightest stages of its journey in the future still."

"Ah! if I could only think so. But now, this happy time is over, and these weeks to which I looked forward so much, up here in fair, lovely Scotland, are going to glide, with many other things fair and beautiful, into the veiled vista of the past, and nothing will remain for me but memories. May I," he went on, in trembling tones, as if summoning up his courage to ask something important and grave, "may I come and renew these memories in the future, when you are in London, from time to time?"

"I think you know you may," she answered, softly. "I shall always be glad

to see you, and pleased that you care to come."

He turned away as she uttered the last words, as if his feelings might become too strong for him, and he paused on the pathway as they wound up the hill, and looked back over the misty view that they were leaving far below them; and Clare, as he paused, turned also. She glanced up at him. What strange and perplexing feelings, she wondered, were contending upon his dark face!

"I think we must be going down again," she said presently, for the dusk was gathering quickly and evening falling faster around them than she had been aware of.

"Hark! there is the carriage passing; they will be anxious if we do not soon make our appearance at home."

She passed before him as she spoke, and

began slowly to descend the hill. He followed her.

"Miss Erskine," he said, hesitatingly again, "I do not think you need *me* to tell you, how deep my feeling is for you—how intensely happy it makes me, to hear you call me your friend."

"Thank you, Major Carr," said Clare, quietly. "It is very good of you to have such kind feelings for me. I am very glad to be your friend; and I think you know all that nearly as well as I can express it to you."

"I only know," he exclaimed, eagerly, "that if I dared—ah! Miss Erskine, if I were only a little braver—if I could dare to lose what is so precious to me, I would cast the die. I would tell you, ah! so much, so much I should like to tell you; but the beginning and the end of it would be my own unworthiness."

"I do not measure worth with an inch line when I choose my friends, or weigh it much in the scales of wisdom, I am afraid," said Clare. "But I think you know all about it, Major Carr," she added. "I do not know what you would wish me to say."

"What I would wish!" he murmured. "Ah! me, if fortune came winged on our wishes, there would not be much trouble in this life of ours. But, alas! wishing is not often of much use—at least it has never been so to me."

"I do not think I understand you, Major Carr," said Clare, quietly. "Do you know, I think we had better be going home; we cannot make much more of the view, can we? The mist is falling lower and lower upon the hills."

"One more afternoon," said Verner, softly; "one more, sweet afternoon, to add

to my store of happy memories of the autumn that is gone!"

Then, with few more words and none clearer or less enigmatical, they turned and walked quickly home together down the winding glen.

CHAPTER VIII.

A HIGHLAND MEETING.

THE *Stirling Castle* came into Portalloch the next afternoon, with her flags all flying and with a band of music playing merrily on board. It was the Thursday of the Meeting, the day of the first great ball, and it was a bright, pleasant day. The fickle fortune of weather had favoured the festivities of the Highland city more than usual this year. The sun was glistening brightly upon the spires and houses of the town, as the steamboat glided up to the canal-side and

the long towing-ropes were cast ashore. They had had a charming voyage and a merry party on board. The silvery birches upon the wooded banks had glistened with sparkling rain-drops as they had glided along; the sunshine had danced upon the froth and spray tossed up by the paddle-wheel; and the gulls had swooped round their mast-head throughout the whole voyage, spreading their snowy wings against the dappled sky.

All the party from the Glen were in great spirits, for, besides their own agreeable society, they found many pleasant and distinguished personages on board. Nearly every lodge and house within thirty miles of the loch-side had sent its contribution to Captain Fraser's passengers to-day, and as the ladies sat together in their trim tweed costumes and plumed hats, enveloped

in their many warm, coloured rugs and wrappers, they made gay and picturesque groups below the gangway on the little quarter-deck, and in snug corners among the luggage around the funnel.

Dear old Captain Fraser was in the height of his glory. This was one of the cheeriest days of his year, and as he went from group to group, with his handsome little terrier at his heels, he had a courteous speech to utter, an eager salute to make, to one and all of them; to say nothing of many an anecdote and reminiscence to draw attention and interest to each point of prominence in the passing view. Captain Fraser knew everybody, and everybody who knew the Highlands knew him.

They all landed at Portalloch. Omnibuses were piled high with luggage; a fearful confusion of travellers and valets, and maids

and porters, natives and foreigners, taking place immediately as the steamboat disgorged her freight; and Ewen and all the attendant satellites of our particular party had a rough time of it for a few minutes, while they struggled to separate their respective belongings from the luggage of the throng.

"I will walk, father," said Clare, as she saw the huge omnibus that had been engaged for them, filling rapidly with rugs and wrappers in the inside, and laden with a mound of luggage on the top.

"And so will I," said Verner.

"And I, too," said Charlie Keith.

"Will you?" exclaimed the laird. "Well, I don't know that I will not accompany you. Come, we will take the short cut, and I will be bound we will be at the hotel before the rest of them."

And away the four went, crossing the canal at the first lock, running down a sharp bit of hill, and then threading their way across the yellow stubble of the shaven corn-fields, between tall hedge-rows, and along the lane towards the town, which lay bathed in a glowing sunset on the banks of its rushing river.

They passed close by the entrance to the ground of the games, where long rows of carriages were awaiting their owners, where a curious motley crowd was clustering thick round the door, and whence thrilling strains reached them of the wild pibroch of Lochaber, which Cluanach's piper was performing proudly to a listening and admiring throng. But the laird would not hear of their going in.

"No, no," he said, when they proposed it. "Come along, my birdie, to the hotel;

you have enough to do before five in the morning to-morrow. I am not going to let you begin with the games to-day."

So on they trudged across the river, up the sloping street, to the hotel.

A few hours later they were in the brilliant ball-room—Mrs. Raymond Paget resplendent in La Ferrière; Clare, trim and fresh as usual, in soft violet tulle; the laird in his Highland dress, and George eclipsing every one in diamond shirt-studs and snowy frills.

It was a capital good Meeting that year. The rooms were filled already when our party entered, and the gathering was very brilliant and characteristic.

The dancing had already begun. Down the length of the wide hall the first reel was just started as they entered, and they

paused to watch it for a few minutes near the door.

Mrs. Raymond Paget exclaimed with astonishment; the Englishmen looked on with sparkling eyes and with much enjoyment and some little envy at the fun; for great fun it was for those who could manage to do it. The music which struck up in the gallery was stirring to a degree, and the enthusiasm and excitement of the dancers was most exhilarating and infectious, and it was a very pretty sight. The long room, filled from end to end with ladies in every diversity of charming toilet, with men in Highland dresses of every conceivable tartan and style—some uniforms from Highland regiments among them, their vivid scarlet lighting up the picture gaily at every point. The uniforms, the glitter of silver horns and dirk and braiding, the sparkle

of Cairngorm, and the rich, mingled hues of the waving tartans, gave wonderful brilliancy to the scene, as they whirled round and round in the stirring reel of "Tulloch," and the vivid colours of the Highland dresses mingled with the rainbow tints of the ladies' floating robes.

Our party stood and watched, admiring and amused, together, for the long reel reached to the entrance, and it was impossible to proceed further into the ball-room while it was going on.

The laird stood smiling and bowing from side to side, for he knew every native of the country about him, and every one from far and near knew him. He stood smiling brightly upon all the "young world," who were whirling and dancing before him with such frantic enthusiasm, and in all the brilliant crowd there was no more noble

form than his—as he stood in his Highland dress, very simple and unadorned, carrying his plumed bonnet in one hand; his grey head held high and proudly, although often bent in gracious recognition and salute. Clare had abandoned every other cavalier and admirer for the moment, and was leaning tenderly upon his arm. Marion was just behind them with the colonel, and the two Englishmen stood with Mrs. Raymond Paget a little on one side.

Long ago—or "long ago," as it seemed to her—Clare had come to her first ball in these well-known rooms; had made her *début* much earlier than she ought to have done, because her uncle would not go again without her, and because it was the autumn before her father carried her first away. And she had entered the room then with her beloved uncle Lairdie, and been conducted

round the great hall by him, and presented proudly as his niece, and one day heiress, to the assembled magnates of the North.

And, so, she always liked to come in with him, and stand through this first long reel, and hear his cheery remarks upon his friends and cronies as he saw them one by one among the crowd. And she would never dance this first dance with any one, for it belonged to her uncle, and with him she liked to go once round year by year (as she appeared again in the country), to be kindly greeted by many a friend, old enough to be of his early days, although well-known also as a friend of her youth to her. She liked to go round with him, and hear the hearty welcome reaching him from side to side; to feel that she herself was a Highlander as she partook with him of the genial cordiality of her Highland friends; and she

felt always, as she passed from group to group and clung closely to his arm, that amid all the many changes and many wandering experiences of her present life, her chief pride and satisfaction lay in the fact that she was Highland, in spite of everything, and belonged so much to him!

Her father claimed little part in the possession of her at these times, nor, indeed, having once shot his grouse for the season, did he think much more for the present on the fact of his Scotch descent.

It would 'come in' again next August. The English covers and the southern yachting cruise were points of more primary importance as the month of September approached its close.

"Are you going to join in these barbarous performances?" said Verner, presently, in a low tone to Clare, having escaped from Mrs.

Raymond Paget for a moment, and arrived at her side.

"Barbarous! Major Carr, don't forget yourself, if you do not want to quarrel with *me!*"

"I beg your pardon. Am I offending? I mean, do you not think a great deal of energy that might be well expended in a valse presently, is being wickedly wasted in this terrific reel?"

"Oh! you can valse anywhere," said Clare, contemptuously; "but you can only see a reel danced like that up here."

"Perhaps I might say *tant mieux*," he answered lightly, "only I should fear to make you angry again."

"Yes; do not say it," she replied. "I never like, you know, Major Carr, to think that *my* friends do not care for Highland things."

"I think a great many things in the Highlands are very much to be cared for," he said; "but to reel dancing, Miss Erskine, I fancy one must be 'to the manner born.' Ah! I declare it is over now; will you dance the next valse with me?"

"Shall I?" she answered with suddenly brightened colour. "I wonder if my uncle will be tired of me by the time it begins. You know this ball is not the least like any other one to me. I never think much about the dancing, except just a reel now and then with some very old friend, but what I enjoy so much is just going round with him, you know, and seeing so many people I can remember since I was quite a child,—and then hearing them greet him so gladly, and to listen to him talking to them all."

"Yes, but will you not come and walk

with me a little, and tell me something about everybody, for I feel like a bird fresh from another clime among all this brilliant plumage. It is the only occasion on which I ever remember feeling thoroughly ashamed of my black coat."

"Oh, I think just a few make a variety," said Clare, laughing. "Ah, what a delicious valse that is they are beginning! Is it not?"

"Will you not come?—please do. I have said I am engaged to you, so do not punish me for my presumption by the very feminine revenge of saying 'no.' Do come, one turn."

And so, before she had scarcely realized or consented to it, he had taken calm possession of her, and in two minutes had carried her swiftly floating down the room; far out of reach of Mrs. Raymond Paget's

observations, or of any disturbing interference from her.

The laird looked on with a bright, happy glance, following their course through the brilliant throng.

"She will never dance younger," he said laughingly to Marion, who slid into Clare's place by his side. "It is very pretty to see the birdie, Marion, is it not? floating round like a swan upon the loch, eh? It is worth coming, just to look on at her once in a way."

Marion was looking on also, but with less satisfaction in her eyes.

The Arnleighs had just joined the party, and with Lady Arnleigh she had exchanged an expressive glance as Verner Carr moved away, carrying Clare along with him, and Marion sighed as she walked on with her father towards the centre of the long room.

Clare had disappeared from them for the present, at all events.

Lady Arnleigh turned to watch with amusement for a few minutes Mrs. Raymond Paget venting her irritation and jealousy of Clare and Verner, in most unmerited displays of temper towards good-natured Charlie Keith. He was requesting her to valse with him; and Mrs. Raymond, while she consented, was doing so with many fiery expletives, in abuse of the room, the crowd, the dust, the general unfitness of the Northern Assembly for the exhibition of Madame La Ferrière's gown.

"I shall get it torn to atoms, I know," she exclaimed, pathetically, as she dived into the dance, with much dejection, at length, abandoning herself languidly to the support and protection of Captain Keith's vigorous and encircling embrace.

Lady Arnleigh laughed a little cynically to herself, as she watched this couple glide away, and then she turned to accept the arm which the gallant colonel was proffering with much *empressement* and politeness. With him she moved forward, following Marion and the old laird round the corners of the crowded ball-room, threading behind the dancers, until they reached the line of seats in the centre, against the wall. Here many friends of north and south were collected, and here sat the lady of the lord-lieutenant, with many other Highland persons of distinction, whose part it was to patronize and give their august countenance to the yearly balls. By these gracious hostesses of this county festivity, Lady Arnleigh and many other visitors coming from varied southern scenes, were made cordially welcome, and found each an appropriate place.

Here Marion sat down, and the laird and his brother lingered, laughing and talking pleasantly among their lady friends, through valse, and quadrille, and reel, and valse again, as they followed each other in swift succession; and the ball went on. And from where they lingered, Clare's light, graceful form could be seen passing from partner to partner; now threading the mazes of a strathspey, with some cheery-faced cousin in radiant cairngorms and tartan; now floating round again in valse or galop, and very often with Verner Carr as her attendant or guide.

Often the laird laughed merrily aloud as he watched her footing it nimbly in the quick-step at the reel o' hoolichan, or whirling round in the intricate and most perplexing figure of this most exciting dance; and he greeted her with hearty

praise and congratulation at her performances, as, at last, as the supper-hour drew nigh, she came back to him, hot and flushed, all sparkling with bright youth and happiness, after much valsing and quadrilling, and after many a hard-danced reel.

"Well done, Birdie," he said. "Have you had enough of it? I am glad to see all that French dancing I hear about in the winter, and all the London balls, have not driven the reel-steps from the toe-points yet. Eh! well done; you and Clanrannachan, in that last reel of Tulloch, made a famous pair."

She was standing opposite to him, answering with a gay, loving smile, his cheery words.

"You are tired out now, I suppose, and want some supper?"

"Not one single bit tired," exclaimed Clare. "And I am going to dance the long country dance, uncle Lairdie, with Hector Ross. Do you know, we have not danced together since before he went to India, I do not know how many years ago."

"A great shame," murmured Verner, discontentedly, "to waste precious time and energy on such a performance. You had much better come and sit down, Miss Erskine. We had far better take the opportunity of having some supper—look, it is going to last twenty minutes. Do throw over the kilted gentleman, and come downstairs, instead, with me."

Clare looked round at him with a vivid blush on her cheek and a bright sparkle in her eyes.

"I should like it," she said, in a low tone, "much better, Major Carr. I should

like to sit down and rest with you, although, indeed, I love the long country dance. But I cannot, indeed, I cannot throw over my cousin. I have not danced with him for such a long time, not since he went away, you know, when I was quite a child."

"Tell him you have given up bad old habits," said Verner, smiling at her in his persuasive way, "and that you perform that dance—I will use no descriptive adjective—that particular national dance no longer."

"Oh, I cannot," repeated Clare, in a distressed tone. "Indeed, indeed I cannot throw over so old a friend."

"I fancy new southern friends will always have to go to the wall with you, when old Scotch ones come in," said Verner, a little bitterly. "I half suspected that, Miss Erskine, long ago."

"No, no!" she exclaimed, in a hasty,

deprecating tone. "Don't say that, Major Carr; why do you torment me? you know—Ah! what was I going to say? I think all our friends, old or new, should be able to form a pretty true estimate from me of the extent and depth of my friendships. I fear I am only too transparent in the revelations towards every one of what I feel; and you—I do not think you are really very jealous, Major Carr. I think you may survive, with great patience, my dancing with my cousin in the country dance to-night, if I promise to go to supper with you all the time they are dancing it up here to-morrow. Will that arrangement do?"

"To-morrow night—famous!" he exclaimed; "still better. And I will stay here, and watch you dancing it now."

The long country dance was, indeed, the

central event of the evening. It was a grand sight, rivalling the kilted reel in national characteristics and enthusiasm. The rush from top to bottom of the long room was very wonderful to behold, as the music burst forth in a furious, quick, reel tune, and the first couple dashed frantically down the middle of the dance. One after another followed them, until Highlander and Lowlander, civilian and military, kilt and troues, gorgeous aerial dresses and gay waving tartans, were mingling frantically together—as they crossed hands, tore down and up the middle, turned round their neighbour's partners and set to their own; and then began all over and over again, while the horns and violins in the music gallery rose into wilder and wilder strains, and the bagpipes took up the tune, and carried it valiantly forward as the stringed instru-

ments died away with exhaustion, and could play no more!

For twenty minutes the dancing continued with unabating energy and fun. Then Clare, with her ruddy-faced young partner, in dark green jacket and crimson kilt, appeared at the lower end, having come right down through every single couple from the further end of the long room. There was uncle Lairdie standing, awaiting her, and Marion, with many cheery smiles but with determined and arrestive words.

"Come, that will do, my birdie," said her uncle. "Well done, Hector; you have not forgotten the old style of footing it in the country dance—well done! You have had a good turn, and now I am going to carry you off, Clare. Not one more dance to-night."

"Oh! uncle Lairdie—Marion—just one more."

"Not one," said her uncle, laughing. "Do not let us forget we have to-morrow night to go through, and the journey on Saturday."

"My dear child," said Marion, "you must really come."

Clare looked rapidly round.

Where was Verner Carr? He was sure to come forward and help her to beg for one other valse, if he were within reach. But he was not to be seen. His place against the centre pillar of the ball-room, where he had leant and watched her during the first part of the country dance, was deserted.

She could not see him; so, after pausing a moment and looking artfully round, she took her cóusin's arm again and said, "Very well, uncle Lairdie; I dare say you are quite right. I am ready to go."

Hector Ross led her downstairs, talking

all the way to her as they went, thinking "what a nice style of girl, foreign travel and London life notwithstanding, his cousin Clare had turned out;" and he went on rattling out to her pleasant little reminiscences of their early days, of hill scrambles and river fishing and rowing enterprises at the old Glen; and Clare answered him brightly, though often scarcely hearing what he said. For the present had become more to her just then than any ancient reminiscence of the far past, and she was wondering where Verner Carr had gone—why he had deserted his post of observation during the country dance.

She caught a glimpse of him as they passed the supper-room. He was talking to Mrs. Raymond Paget. They were standing at a corner of the table near the open door. Verner had his back turned to the

entrance, and he was leaning forward with one hand upon the table, looking down, apparently listening intently to what the lady said; and Mrs. Raymond, holding a champagne glass in her hand, was looking up at him with her dark, expressive eyes, full of some strong and passionate sentiment. She was addressing him—surely, in some strange voice of appeal, of expostulation, or of reproach.

Clare started, and instantly paused a moment, as she passed the open door. Then, her cousin turning in surprise to her (as her hand, lying lightly upon his arm, seemed to wish to arrest him), she remembered herself, and stepped quickly forward again, as her uncle called to her that the carriage was there.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SECOND DAY.

THE next day was Friday, about the best day of the whole week at that assembly at Portalloch—the best day at the games and the best ball, as it is generally considered, for people keep their prettiest dresses for production the second night. But in the morning it is dull enough; everybody makes a late appearance that day.

It was long past her usual lunch-time, and she had but just finished what stood for that repast and breakfast in one, when

Clare found herself sauntering slowly across the suspension bridge, with Verner Carr by her side; walking both of them in procession with all their own party and many other friends besides, towards the ground where the games were held on the other side of the river from the town.

Verner Carr somehow took his place beside her with calm decision during these days, for the time was short now, and he had much to do in it. He snatched what moments and opportunities he could for the pacification of Mrs. Raymond, and he left her with determined courage, to vent her jealousy and her temper as she pleased upon the devoted, but very indifferent, head of his friend, Captain Keith. He knew he was safe of one thing: Clare was going on the morrow, and not by the same route or train as Mrs. Raymond Paget. That lady had

visits to pay on her southern journey—so declined to travel in the large family carriage which was going right through; and Verner Carr meant to accompany Mrs. Paget in her carriage on her southern journey, and so secure for himself the certainty of some important things: the separation from Clare—to begin with—while the way still lay open before him and no utterly self-committing words had yet been said; then the parting of Clare and Violet, before the latter lady, in anger, had made revelations that might injure him; and lastly, he would gain for himself the opportunity of soothing down Mrs. Raymond Paget, and of restoring her to her wonted condition of apparent adoration and submission to himself.

So this was the last day of this stage of his wary intercourse with Clare. To-day he might allow himself a long line, for he

would not have to disentangle it again to-morrow. So to-day he took his place by Clare from the first moment she appeared at the hotel door; took possession of her cloak, and walked by her as they turned all together down the street towards the games.

People were beginning to talk a good deal about this handsome, dark-faced stranger, who was constant all that Meeting-time by the side of the young heiress of the Glen; for, indeed, the party was one that was much and often talked over and discussed, in all the curious points of their respective histories and destinies, throughout the Highlands; and people were interested to know if this graceful, foreign-looking man, with his long, dark moustache and quick, eager eyes, was to be the future Laird of the Glen, with all its wide interests

and domain. Verner, as they one and all remarked of him, did not, indeed, look much like a Highland laird, or as a fitting successor to Patrick Erskine, the present master of the Glen.

People had much to say, too, during that Meeting-time, of rumours with regard to the condition of George Erskine's affairs. Many wild and strange stories had reached the North, of his extravagance, of his countless debts, of the bad prospects, altogether, if he fell heir to the Glen; and people watched the party with much curious interest, wondering often to each other as to what there might be shortly coming, in the different histories of each. And people remarked of both the laird and the colonel, that they were looking old and ill.

The laird was always frail and delicate in aspect indeed, but people said that he

was changed this year; and George, well got up and well preserved as he looked when he came full-dress among them, was showing years, they said, and was not the man he had been a short time ago.

All these remarks were being whispered about, as Clare walked, with Verner attendant upon her, into the grounds of the games.

It was a lovely afternoon—a rare thing, indeed, at that season and at that event. The sun was shining brightly upon the scene, upon the yellow corn-fields on the distant slopes of hills that formed the valley, upon woods rich with autumn tints, that clustered among the houses above the lower town, and along the edge of the terrace that stretched high above the river; and the gay sunshine, pouring down upon the little inclosure where the games were held, tipped with bright bits of light the glittering orna-

ments of the pipers, drew out into vivid contrast the varied colourings of tartan and silk and tweed, shone upon fair faces and stalwart forms, upon eagle feathers in chieftains' bonnets, and upon bright-hued ostrich plumes from the treasures of Heath or Brown.

There was a large pavilion at one end of the ground, in which the ladies crowded in wet weather, but which they scorned on a fair day like this.

There was a wooden platform in the centre, and on this were performed reels, gillie-callums, strathspeys, and hoolichans, by bold and stalwart competitors, to the admiration and often amusement of the company and for the approbation of the judges, who sat, gravely clad in plaids of varied tartan, and distinguished with plumes of different degree, in a long row upon a bench

apart. The pipers played and the dancers footed it indefatigably.

The crowd thickened and dispersed, and often gathered again. People sauntered up and down or sat in knots of two or three, and laughed and were merry together, delighted to meet, and full of news and talk; and Clare, as she strolled among them, with Verner still constant ever by her side, had many a greeting to exchange, many a cheery word to say, as friends, old and dear, crowded round her, and eager inquiries about times and things and persons of the present and the future and the past, came bubbling from one to the other in a pleasant, incessant stream. Verner was amused at it all, but he became a little cross as the afternoon wore on.

"I think it is a horrid bore," he said, laughing, but a little bitterly at the same

time; "a horrid bore, that you have got so many friends, and 'auld lang syne' acquaintances, Miss Erskine, up in your own country here. I think I, for one, prefer you very much in London. I feel rather 'out of it all' while these innumerable affectionate greetings are going on."

"Oh, but you know, Major Carr, they are all such dear old friends—and cousins, too, the most of them. But was I rude? I beg your pardon. Did I seem to be forgetting you, in the midst of them, all this time, while you have been carrying my cloak, too, so very kindly?"

"I do not in the least object to being your mantle-bearer," he answered pleasantly. "Only, if you have a great many more kilted cousins to greet with effusion, I think I had better go and sit down upon that bench there, under Mrs. Raymond Paget's pro-

tection, and relieve guard for Charlie for a bit; while you receive and exchange all these salutes of affection with the divers branches of the house of Erskine whom I see are assembled here."

"I do not think you need do that," she answered; "unless, indeed, you want to go and finish that very interesting conversation in which you were engaged last night with Mrs. Raymond Paget when my uncle took me away. She seemed to have a great deal to say to you, and I dare say she has a great deal more to add to-day; so if you wish to go, Major Carr, why, here is my partner of the country dance, my cousin Hector, if you like to give my cloak to him."

"I think I will keep it, thank you," Verner answered, in a rather pleased and triumphant tone. He was surprised to hear that she had observed him in his talk with

Mrs. Raymond Paget, but glad at the same time, as she showed so simply that it had made her jealous of him. "I think I will keep it, and I will not complain again, Miss Erskine, if the cousins number more than the tribe of Romany itself. Come, will you like to walk about again?"

"I know what I should like," said Clare, impulsively, as she looked from side to side for a moment, and then up towards the fringe of the hills, where the sun was setting now in a glow of rich crimson and amber beyond Crag Ateraig's grey, rugged peak. "I know what I should like, if I could only get my uncle and father to come."

"And what would that be?" said Verner.

"I should like to walk once round the islands, and far up the river-side, just once go past Duncanan, the house we used to

have in the winter sometimes, long, long ago."

"You mean you would like to leave here and go for a walk?" said Verner. "With all my heart. Just exactly what I too would like to do."

"But I must get father or my uncle Lairdie to come."

"Why?" exclaimed Verner, impatiently, and then he went on in a changed, gentle, and persuasive tone. "Will you not come and show *me* the river? Do; there is nothing that I should like so much. See, your father and the laird are busy with the judges; they have pressed them both into the service, and look, the colonel is quite eager over that performance across the swords. May we not go together? It is not late, Miss Erskine. Do let us go."

"I wonder if I might," said Clare. It

seemed a very pleasant thought to have this one quiet, long walk, just this one more, with Verner Carr—along the old beloved river, among the islands high up the rushing stream—just this one walk before they parted to-morrow, to meet in such scenes, and in such pleasant intimacy, no longer.

For London was never like Scotland for pleasant walks and constant meetings and long days of easy intercourse, such as they had now enjoyed so long; and on the yacht, if he came with them, there would be so many, and all always together as they were so apt to be. And to-morrow the Scotch time was to be quite over for her, and he was leaving her in the same strange way again—leaving her half won; her young, eager love nearly all quite wooed, and smiled, and whispered gently away from her own

possession, and yet her heart and hand unasked for, no faith between them plighted, no vows exchanged.

She felt she could hardly part with him thus; this one little walk they must have together still. So she went with him, many observant eyes following them, and many whispered remarks being made as they left the ground together, passed through the crowd with a few parting words from side to side, and walked down under the shadow of the cathedral, and turned round the corner by the lower side.

CHAPTER X.

ROUND THE ISLANDS.

IT was a bewitching evening for such a stroll. The river rolled grandly beneath the golden and crimson rays of the sunlight, and far along, up its winding and wooded banks, a road stretched, running close all the way by the rushing stream, and winding past garden and villa, past corn-field and green, gentle slope, until they reached the light bridges that spanned the stream between the islands, and led them back to the town again by the other side.

The islands were a richly wooded cluster in the centre of the deep, swift-rushing stream. In the early summer, when they were gemmed with starry anemones, and wild grape hyacinths in blue delicate bloom, each seemed in itself a complete, fair garden, adorned by a lavishly generous nature, and richly watered into fertile beauty by the floods of the encircling river. But now, in the autumn, there were no flowers in the rich undergrowth among the thick clustering trees, and the leaves were falling already, strewing themselves, in bits of golden and russet colouring, upon the shady paths.

The light was shadowy under the trees as they stepped from the bridge and passed on across the islands; the branches swept low over the narrow road, the wind whispered gently among them, the twilight gathered

dimly in shadowed corners, and the sunset fell still in others in glowing, golden fret-work across the pathways between the autumn leaves.

"I always did think," said Clare, "when I was young, that this island walk was the most romantic thing I knew. I used to lay all sentimental scenes of thrilling fiction, which I either read or imagined for myself, in my early days, upon this very path. Do you not think it is very romantic?" she added.

"Strikingly so," he replied, and then he relapsed into silence again, and walked slowly beside her, swinging his stick impatiently with one hand, and throwing her tweed cloak over his shoulder with the other.

"Look," Clare went on; "I remember, when I was quite a little thing, once coming

round by here with uncle Lairdie, and sitting for a whole afternoon just upon that green seat. We had been spending the winter down here, you know, and we used to take long walks together, and talk always about the Glen, and about what we would do when we got back in the spring, for we neither of us could bear leaving it. I remember so well that day—it was the first time that he told me, oh, so many things, I had not had an idea of until then."

"What sort of things?" said Verner, eagerly.

"Oh, about the Glen, you know, and about me, and cousin Marion, and all about —well, some day or other, when things must change, alas! from what they are now."

"What sort of things?" repeated Verner,

but very gently this time, as if he would draw her on to speak her thought before she was well aware.

"Oh, things about the Glen, you know—but do not let us speak of it. I never think of it at all. I cannot bear to look forward and realize that some day it may be."

"Will you not tell me?" he said again, softly, in a persuasive, sympathetic tone.

"Tell you? what I mean to say when I speak of—what may be, of what must be, if I live to be old—some day? Oh, Major Carr, you know."

"I do not in the least know what you are talking about," he said.

"About the dear old Glen, about what my uncle told me on the green seat there that February. Oh, Major Carr, you do know about it—for uncle Lairdie told me that everybody in the country knew about it

but me—that, some day, you know, if they are gone, it must come to me, and not to cousin Marion. I am so sorry for it all. I cannot bear to think of it from any point of view."

"It *must* all come to you?" he said gently again, with the slightest possible emphasis upon the expressive verb.

"Yes, it must, alas! we cannot, any of us, help it."

And then there was a pause, during which Verner's eyes turned with sudden eagerness and quick impulse of resolution upon her face.

She did not notice him as she walked along, absorbed in her recollections. Her eyes were thoughtfully fixed upon the ground; she did not notice his sudden glance, his quick-drawn breath, and the vivid flush of eagerness that rose almost

to his brow, nor did she see that his lips parted to address her, for before one word had dropped from them, she spoke herself again.

"That is to say," she added slowly—"of course, it comes first to father, and then, some day, perhaps, if I live so long, you know, I suppose it must go on to me."

The colour faded from Verner's cheek again, and his lips closed silently upon the unuttered words.

Then things were no better than he had feared they were, and the time for safe action on his part had not yet come. There was a moment's silence, and then in low, suppressed accents he spoke.

"I have known all your brilliant prospects for a long time, Miss Erskine, and that knowledge has quelled me often when I would have pressed closer among the wide and varied circle of your friends."

"I do not know," said Clare, sadly, "why the fact that I must take the Glen some day from cousin Marion, if I live so long, need distance my friends from me. It is hard enough, I think, without that, as it is."

"Ah," said Verner, in a very melancholy and conclusive tone, "there are many considerations that weigh with *your* friends, Miss Erskine, from which positions commoner than yours are free. A man has many misgivings, and needs much self-assertion and satisfaction before he feels competent to call himself your friend."

"And if I call him so!" said Clare; and then they said no more for a few moments as they climbed the little rising ground from out the islands, and came again on a light suspension bridge.

"Major Carr," Clare began again, hesi-

tatingly, "I wish I had the gift of intuition to understand one half you say; at least, that you have been saying lately. I wish I knew what was troubling you exactly, and why you always make out such a bad case for yourself and your own life. Cannot a friend help you?" she added.

"Ah! Miss Erskine, it is the old story," he said with a sigh, as he came up beside her in the narrow road, and they walked quickly along together down by the river's-edge towards the town again. "It is the old story; when a man has wasted the best part of his life, and made ducks and drakes of it, and thrown his energies and everything he has got away, he feels himself, at my age, 'quite out of it,' you know, and only able to stand aside, and let a better fellow take the prize for which he longs."

"I do not know why you should feel like

that," she said, with gentle sympathy in her tone.

"Why I should? Because I know the history of my own life. But knowing, I can realize at least what a friend like you are *may* be to me. May I tell you, now we are parting again, how much your sympathy and your sweet companionship and your gentle friendship *has* been to me during the weeks gone by?"

"You told me this, just the same as this, Major Carr," murmured Clare, in an almost broken tone, "when we said Good-bye at Lady Arnot's breakfast, at Surley, two months ago, and did I not give you an answer then?"

"You did, indeed, and a sweet answer, kind and gentle as yourself; and you let me feel that I had still your sympathy, and would have still your pleasant friendship, if

I ventured ever to follow you to your lovely Glen."

"And did I fail when you came there?" said Clare again.

"Fail? No, no, it is impossible that you could fail. I have sweet, charming days and delightful memories stored up from that bewitching time; and now I am to part from you again, I would ask once more your *souvenir*, your kindly, sympathetic thought for me, as I go out into the loneliness of my life."

"If you are good at remembering, Major Carr," said Clare, in a low tone, "I am sure I can rival you there, for I never can forget, for my part; never anything, anything that once has been."

"Then will you let me come and claim your recollection, when I arrive in London?" he said.

"You know where to find me," she answered. "Until we go to Italy, in January, I shall remain in London, while father goes up and down to Sir Edward Hartopp's, and to all his favourite shooting haunts. I do not think," she added a little wearily, "that I shall go to any of the shooting houses with him this year."

"Then I may come and share your dusky solitude in November, in Curzon Street?" he said lightly. "I shall be in town also all the autumn months—at least," he added, "if you are there."

"Why should I influence your plans?" said Clare, lightly trying to throw off the pathetic tone which their conversation had acquired. "I will be there, and the fogs will be there, but little else that I know of beside. I do not advise you to come to London in November, Major Carr."

"I think I shall appear," he said quietly. "Ah, we are getting near the town again. How can I thank you sufficiently for according to me this delightful walk? I wonder what Mrs. Raymond Paget and Charlie have been doing?"

* * * * *

One more ball, as cheery and full of energy and enthusiasm as the first had been, and then the gathering was over for the year, and the next morning found all the Glen party collected at the railway station, to take farewell of each other and to start upon their different routes.

It was a stirring scene; this was the busiest day of the season at the big northern terminus. There was a long train ready and crowded from end to end, like the huge one which had started from the Euston Station,

carrying sportsmen to the Highlands, two months ago; and again family carriages were crammed with big parties, all travelling southward, in company with sportsmen and school children, and pets, canaries, and London domestics, and dogs. Again Ewen and Fanlie, both in a somewhat sleepy and exhausted frame of mind, were worked up to a noisy degree of mirth and excitement, as all the paraphernalia of travel was packed into the carriage, and on the top. Once again the sad Good-bye was going on at the carriage window between uncle Lairdie and his "bonnie birdie," between the brothers, and between Marion and Clare. Verner had come to see them off—Mrs. Raymond Paget was still in bed—he was to start later with her and her husband about twelve o'clock, and they were not going further that night than Perth.

Charlie Keith travelled with the Erskines, and they were going straight through; hoping to reach their cosy nest in Curzon Street by an early hour on the morrow.

"Once more, Good-bye!" said Verner, springing for a moment on to the step of the carriage, at the window by which Clare sat; "till November in Curzon Street, Good-bye!"

"I do not expect to see you," answered Clare, laughing. "The covers at Hasleigh Court are very good, Major Carr; I do not think you will find London fogs have sufficient attraction in November to drag you away from them."

"We shall see," he replied. "Good-bye, Miss Erskine. Thanks for many pleasant days, thanks for so many happy memories! Once more, till we meet again, Good-bye!"

And he laid his hand upon hers, where

it rested upon the window-sash, and his fingers closed over hers for a moment in a soft, lingering clasp. She let him retain her hand and returned his pressure, and for a moment her eyes were raised, with a wistful, tremulous light in them, to his, but she said nothing in farewell or in reply. His lips parted as if to speak again; but he changed his mind apparently, and was silent also. His gaze upon her softened face was full of intense and pathetic feeling, full of tenderness, and undisguised though unuttered love; and the colour kindled upon Clare's cheek and quick, burning tears rushed into her eyes; she struggled to express her farewell with the composure and dignity the position required of her. The contrast between the passionate tenderness of his gaze, speaking such open confession of eager love for her, drawing an

answer so irrepressibly from her frank, bright eyes, and the calm coolness of his uttered words (his lips asking for friendship while his eyes sought so expressively for love), were all quite irreconcilable and incomprehensible to her; she could not arrive at understanding him, at reading his real wishes with regard to her, or in finding (to anything he looked or uttered) quite the right reply. But all filled her with restless doubt, misgiving, and bewilderment, and made her very vexed and angry, both with herself and with him.

"It had not been quite a happy autumn," she thought, as the train glided away from the station, and they were really gone. It had not been altogether a happy autumn, and certainly not a satisfactory gathering, by any means. She was going back to London much in the frame of mind in

which she had left it, only she had lost a friend since she came north, in Percy—and had gained feelings much deeper and more intense, and much more fitful and more disturbing as well, for one, whom, in accordance with all her former standards of friendship, she did not think she could, in the inner, hidden recesses of her own heart, call by the calm, simple name of "friend."

CHAPTER XI.

FEST UND TREU.

MEANWHILE, Everett Hardy and Percy had had a curious, rambling autumn together.

There had been something about Percy Bligh that had attached Hardy to him from the earliest days of their acquaintance. The earnestness and fidelity of his quiet devotion to Clare; the composure of Percy's character and manners; the *insouciance* and sublime tranquillity with which he had gone down the stream of life, all had vested his society with an attraction for Everett, which

he explained by saying that, "Percy, in contradiction to most other people, was a mighty repose to him." He had got to understand the young fellow, and had learnt the art of diving under the cool, tranquil exterior, into the deep well of feeling below. He had learnt to reach the best of Percy (just as Clare had somehow done), and with Everett, even Percy's silence broke down, and he would converse spontaneously, bringing out quaint but shrewd opinions upon men and things.

There was complete understanding between them, and Everett could weigh better than most people the respective value of these two rival aspirants to Clare Erskine's favour. At a very early stage in his observations indeed, had Everett put Percy and Verner Carr into the scales together; and the test had proved, unquestionably, very much to the advantage of his friend.

"How blind women are!" he often said to himself. "How invariably, if the choice is given them, do they pitch upon the wrong man!"

There was nothing more to be said, however, when he left the Glen. He had gone at once in search of Percy, because he knew, as no one else did, what the young fellow was suffering, in his silent and unexpressive way; and he could not stay, moreover, at the old Glen house, to see Verner Carr insinuating himself with dexterous subtilty into Clare's warm, unsuspicious heart, while he thought of Percy, disconsolate and rejected, wandering about in his solemn, silent way, alone. So Everett went off and found him. He told Percy, with very little reference to the Glen or the Erskines, that he wanted to go and do some Norwegian landscapes, exactly at a part of that country

where he knew, as it happened, that a friend of Percy's had a stream; and up there they went—Everett with colours and sketch-book, and Percy with some huge fishing-rods and with numberless big salmon flies of every description and hue. There they had remained throughout the early autumn—Percy spending long, silent days on the river; catching infinite numbers of enormous fish, and going through the labour of catching them, day after day, and hour after hour, with a calm but disconsolate aspect, that implied some satisfaction in performing at least one solemn duty, and offering still this faithful ovation to the goddess of sport; finding some comfort, too, in the process, as he went gravely through with it—saying nothing about his innermost trouble at all.

It was not till late in the season, as they were coming home; returning after a tour

through Denmark together; as they were crossing the sea, and sitting smoking in company on the deck one fine, moonlight night, that he suddenly turned his face away from Everett, looked across the dark billowy ocean, took his pipe from between his lips for a moment, and began, *à propos* of nothing, to speak of Clare.

"I say, Hardy," he began—"I wish you would tell me—before we get home to the other side, you know—I wish you would just tell me, if she is going to marry that fellow; whether it is really settled beyond recall or mistake."

"I do not know," said Everett; "nothing was settled, at all events, when I left the Glen."

"But you think she is?" continued Percy. "I expect she means it, don't you?"

"I could not make out what *he* meant, to begin with," replied his friend.

"What Carr meant? By Jove! Everett, there is no doubt of that, is there? Of course it was as plain as need be, only I was such a blind ass of a fellow, I never saw anything till you pointed it out to me and told me what to look for; then I saw it all clearly enough, that very last night, you know."

"He is an odd, slippery kind of customer," continued Everett. "I really give you my word, Percy, I do not know what he meant. I had been looking on at his little game for a good while in the summer-time, in London, and all about, and I declare I do not know; but I do *not* think the fellow is in love with Éclair."

"Not in love with her, by George!" exclaimed Percy, with sudden excitement. "What does he want, then? Hang him! can't he let other fellows alone? We

were much jollier, the *old* lot of us, Everett, before the colonel took in Verner Carr."

"We were, old chap. I wish, with all my heart, Mrs. Raymond Paget had kept tighter hold of him, and not let him slip into a place in our set; but there he is now, Percy, in with the whole thing, like the rest of us, and yet, not for the life of me, can I make out his game. He is not in love with Éclair, though I think it is pretty likely he may be in love with something else."

"With her chances, eh? But, by Jove! Everett, if that is what he's looking to, he may be well sold there. If George's duns get their fingers upon the old Glen, there won't be much left to come down to her. Not that she need want a rap of it, bless her, not as far as I am concerned."

"Perhaps Verner Carr knows as much as you do, old chap, and does not altogether

agree with you," Everett answered, with a little sardonic laugh. "I expect that is it, Percy; he has been reconnoitring up in the Highlands, and is holding on."

"But probably it is all settled before now," Percy added, disconsolately.

"I do not expect it," Everett replied again. "Carr is a very wary bird, and Eclair's future is uncertain."

Percy was silent then for a moment, and puffed at his pipe, his heavy blue eyes wandering away towards the sea-line again.

"By Jove! Everett," he said again, at length; "what an ass I have made of myself, to be sure, about her—I, who had such a contempt for the kind of thing! Do you remember that first year she came in the yacht to Monaco with us?—a little, slim bit of a thing she was, in a blue-braided yachting dress, with that brown, wavy hair

of hers, and those big eyes looking up like a child at you, with such pretty glances in them, like the sun on a bit of the river when you are fishing of a summer's day, and full of such pretty ways, and so demure with us all, like a little Quaker, only as full of fun as a kitten, too—eh? do you remember her? I have liked her ever since then, Everett. She always seemed to make a different fellow of me—and to make a changed, bright thing of life when she was there. And no one ever came between us till this Carr turned up one day at Naples. He came on board the yacht with Mrs. Raymond Paget. George asked him to come and cruise, and so he got in, you know, and, worse luck to it, he has stuck to us ever since."

"You will get over it, Percy, old chap. You cheer up," Everett said presently, in a lively and encouraging tone.

"I cannot—that is just it," exclaimed Percy, turning round upon Everett and looking straight up with a very despairing expression in his steady, faithful eyes. "I cannot," he repeated; "it sticks to me, I tell you; I never lose it for a moment; and, by Jove! I do not think I want to get over it, and that's the oddest thing of all. It is taking all the salt out of life for me. I don't care for anything—not for one single thing I do. I never cease to see her, just there before me, Everett, and never cease to long for her one moment of the day. And it is a horrid pain—gnawing away, as it were, at the very cords of a fellow's life; and yet I don't want to lose the feeling and the thought of her always before me; and I think I will stick steadily to it, Everett, come what may, you know, and let it cost me what it will. I am

the sort of man that has only one die to throw on that kind of thing, old fellow, you see, and I have thrown it, so there it is for ever. I cannot pick it up again."

"Time works wonders," said Everett, philosophically, and then, after a pause, he rose and stood silent in front of Percy. There seemed nothing more to say.

"Good night," said Percy laconically, and then, as he said nothing and remained still sitting there, Everett moved slowly away and left him and walked once down the length of the deck.

Percy was still smoking steadily when he came back again, leaning on the coil of ropes, his eyes turned out towards the sea, and with his usual quiet, resolute expression upon his face.

"Come along, old chap," said Everett. "I am going off to turn in."

"All right," said the other.

"Good night, then;" and Everett, after looking at him hesitatingly for a moment, decided that there was nothing more he felt desirable for him to do or say. "Good night," he repeated again, and then, with one more glance back at his friend, he turned down the companion ladder.

Percy was quite alone then.

It was a grand night at sea—just the sort of night when the salt breeze, blowing strong and fresh from the surging billows, beats upon the face and temples with a stimulating power, stirs the pulses, warms the blood, and makes the brain whirl in a giddy delirium with a strange intoxication caused by the strong, fresh air.

It was dark, for heavy clouds had come rolling up over the sky and obscured the glittering moonbeams which had come flood-

ing down upon them when they had first sat smoking there.

The steamer rolled swiftly on, over tossing billows and bounding spray, ploughing the deep, blue waters, and leaving far behind her a silvery ray, marking her course over the ocean, where her bows had cut the water and her whirling screw had struck the foaming waves. The masts and rigging rose dark against the sky, and volumes of fiery smoke poured forth from the funnel's mouth and rolled heavily over Percy's head, and then floated behind them across the dark, cloudy heavens towards the dusky horizon far away.

The steamboat tossed and rolled on, the funnel cast forth its smoke and fire, and the steersman was changed often at the helm, and the blue darkness of the autumn night yielded before the warm flush of the morn-

ing, and still Percy was there, sitting sometimes on the coil of rope where Everett left him, rising often to pace the deck in his long ulster, with his hands plunged deep in his pockets, and with slow, steady footsteps to and fro.

"Poor old Percy!" as they often called him. His heart was very strong and faithful. It was still a very bad business for him.

"Fest und treu" was the only motto by which *he* could describe or spell out the tangled story of his life.

CHAPTER XII.

IN CURZON STREET.

IT was six weeks later. Everett had been down in Hampshire, visiting his own few belongings, finishing up a lot of rough sketches he had brought home with him, and meditating upon his winter plans.

He had not heard from Clare for a long time, and was wondering, accordingly, what the Erskines' set, father and daughter, and friends, were going to do. He had finished his sketches, and so, by way of an excuse, he brought them with him, and up to town he came to inquire for Clare.

Percy had left him at Hull the morning after they landed on English *terra firma* together, and had gone down, he believed, to Wynton, and was there still with his brother, shooting the covers, and bearing his own troubles as usual, in his own quiet way. And all the men of their set were scattered about too, occupied in much the same pursuits, shooting pheasants, setting to work for a winter's hunting, paying country visits here and there.

Everett, arriving about this time, late one afternoon in town, turned his steps towards Curzon Street, thinking pleasantly, as he walked along, of the friendly meeting which he promised himself, and of the cosiness of a twilight talk in Clare's little drawing-room over a cup of tea. Just turning round the corner out of Chesterfield Street, in the soft, dusky light (coming

towards him with his usual light, easy step), he saw Charlie Keith, walking fast, with his eyes fixed upon the pavement and with an absent and concentrated air.

"Halloa!" Everett exclaimed, unceremoniously, and stopped him with a hand upon his shoulder and a friendly salute. "Halloa! What's the hurry, old fellow? Whither away so fast?"

"Hardy, by Jove! How do you do? Where have you sprung from, I should like to know? I never saw you a bit coming along in the fog."

"I dare say not; you were not looking my way," answered Everett, shortly. "But how are you, my boy, eh? Are things all right with you?"

"Right as a trivet, thanks; all right, I am as jolly as ever. And you, old fellow, where have you been hiding all this last century or two?"

"I have been to Norway."

"Norway! have you? Well, that is not a bad place, and where is Bligh, eh? Was he not with you?"

"Yes; and we came back together. I fancy he is at Wynton now."

"Is he? the poor old duffer, by Jove!" said Charlie Keith, pityingly, from which it may be surmised that the condition of poor Percy's affection was not unknown to him, and the evident connection of ideas in his mind confirmed this, as it revealed itself in his next remark. "I say, Hardy," he exclaimed, suddenly changing his tone and turning eagerly to Everett, "have you seen Éclair lately, eh?"

"No, not for months," said Everett; "nor heard from her, for some time. I am on my way to see her now; to ask if she is in town, at all events."

"Yes, she is in town—that is right, do go and see her. You don't know anything about them—not about any of them, eh?"

"Nothing; I was about to ask you," said Everett.

"Well, I tell you what it is," said Keith, with much concern in his good-natured, rapid tones; "I think there is something up with them—there's some trouble on. Éclair is not herself, Hardy—not a bit of her; and, besides that, she is awfully cut up to-day, specially, for she has had some rather bad news from the Glen."

"From the Glen? What, anything wrong there—the old laird—Miss Erskine? Why, what is the matter, Charlie, up there?"

"They don't tell her much," Keith continued. "But she showed me the letter; and, to tell the truth, I don't like the looks

of it. The old laird has had some kind of stroke—'tis not much, they say; but she is very down about it—awfully down, Hardy; but you go and see her—that is all right."

"Is she alone?" said Everett.

"Yes, quite. She has been in town by herself for the last fortnight."

"And where is her father?" said Everett.

"Down at Hartopp's, I believe; and, oh! I say, Hardy, she does not know anything about *that*, you know—but things are awfully bad with him. They tell me the Jews are going to 'close in' and sell him up, before the old laird dies. Perhaps Éclair does know something about it, for she looks dreadfully low, whatever is the cause. I say, Hardy, I wonder what Carr means in that quarter?"

"What do you think?" said Everett. "You were all the autumn at the Glen."

"Oh, nothing came off there—that I am sure of. Mrs. Raymond Paget never took her finger out of the pie. Carr did not have a chance, even if he wanted to. He made hard running, certainly, at the Meeting, and left Mrs. Raymond Paget entirely upon my hands; and a bad time I had of it in consequence, I can tell you; but nothing was squared up—I know that much from what Verner said at the St. James's the other night himself."

"Is he in town?"

"He has been; perhaps he is gone now. But I cannot make out what he is after. He knows well enough what a big leak George has in his craft, poor old fellow! So perhaps he's afraid to take the final plunge; but he blows hot and cold, at all events, in a pretty even current; and I cannot make Éclair out in the matter, any more than him."

Charlie Keith's powers of penetration were not very deep.

Everett paused a moment.

"I will go and see her, then," he said. "I hope it is nothing serious with the old laird."

"I hope not, by Jove! I am sure. But you go. I am awfully glad you have turned up, Hardy. I began to conclude that you and Bligh had become food for the fishes in the course of your unknown voyages in some mysterious sea. I am awfully glad that you have turned up!"

Everett walked on and rang the bell presently, at the little house in the corner of Curzon Street; and in two minutes Clare's tall footman was conducting him upstairs.

It was quite dark, but there was only firelight in the room as he entered—a warm, dancing firelight, throwing a glow of rippling

colour over pictures and mirror and all the little cosy furnishings; over sketches of his own, that lined the walls on every side, full of pleasant reminiscences of their many journeys together in foreign lands; over all the soft, harmonious combinations of colouring which he had helped her to select; over low, cushioned chairs; over flower and book-stand; and finally revealing Clare herself, and her big colley-dog, and her father's favourite black-and-tan terrier, all clustered on the rug together in a sociable enjoyment of the warmth and glow from the fire.

She turned round as he entered, but had no time to rise to greet him before he had sprung forward and was clasping her outstretched hand between both his own.

"Everett! I am so delighted to see you."

"And I am enchanted beyond words, Éclair, to find that you are in town."

"I am *so* glad to see you," she continued, slowly rising from the rug, and gently shaking the little tan-nosed dog from off her dress. "How good of you to come and find me out! Yes, here I am in town, and for the first time in my life in November."

"And your father?"

"Oh, he is at Quentin with Sir Edward. You know they have a big battue down there this week, but I did not care to go; somehow, I much preferred coming back to town when we left Lady Arnleigh's, and oh, I am so glad I came, for, Everett, I have not told you, I am so dreadfully unhappy, I have had such bad news from the Glen. I had this letter from cousin Marion this morning, and she tells me that uncle Lairdie has had some terrible illness, quite suddenly, you know. I cannot quite under-

stand about it, she has written so little; but look, Everett, you read it, and tell me what you think."

He took the letter from her hand after looking up anxiously into her face all the time she spoke, scanning it in the dancing firelight as well as he could; and towards the firelight he now bent with the letter and tried to read, by its uncertain lustre, Miss Erskine's hastily written lines.

"Stop!" exclaimed Clare. "I quite forgot, Everett. Wait till John has brought the light."

She rang the bell hastily, and he waited; following her movements with his watchful, searching gaze, as she crossed the rug before him, rang, and then returned again, and sank down slowly, with a certain languor of movement quite new to her, upon a low chair by the chimney corner.

The servant entered instantly, carrying a lamp into the room. He set it down, closed the blinds and curtains, and then raised the folding leaves of the little tea-table, and placed it by Clare's side; and while the man moved about the room, she remained silent a moment, watching his movements with a restless, impatient glance, and Everett could look again at her, and study her face anew, in the flood of light the lamp shed over the room.

The sunny, waving hair was all unchanged as it rippled back from her fair temples with their delicate, faint tracery of blue veins; but that was nearly all that *was* unchanged about her, in the few short months since he had seen her last! She seemed scarcely the same Clare, for all the brightness that suggested their favourite pet name for her was quite gone. Her cheeks had paled, the

sunny lustre had left her clear, blue eyes, and the proud, free, open expression that used so particularly to distinguish her, had changed into a hesitating, tremulous, almost plaintive look, as her eyes met his when she turned again at last towards him and the servant left the room.

"Read Marion's letter, now, Everett," she said, "and tell me what you think it means. I cannot make it out at all."

He read. The lines were few, the information scanty, but there was a great deal implied in the carefully chosen words; implied and yet concealed; insinuated, as if in preparation, and veiling, as they strove gently to communicate what they wished and yet feared to tell.

The old laird had been ill, and the results of this mysterious illness, Marion hinted, were unknown. Clare must not alarm her-

self, but they must say "God's will be done!" "The laird was an old man, and the stroke had been a severe one," but, he "sent his love to his little birdie," and she "was not to be sad for him!"

"He was well six days ago, when he last wrote to me," said Clare; "and his letter made me quite happy for the entire day. It was so like himself—so full of brightness and of beautiful things, and of sweet, dear sayings about the old Glen, and about next summer-time when we would be all together: he and Marion, and father and me; and since then it seems he has had this illness. What can it be, Everett? What kind of illness could come so quickly?"

"Things come very quickly in this life sometimes, dear little friend," said Hardy, and he stood looking with a blank, dismayed expression, for a moment upon the few

careful but very ominous lines. They struck coldly to his kind heart, for they carried, to his perceptions, a sad message, very tenderly but very surely conveyed; and Clare, with all her troubled anxiety, seemed quite unconscious of it; she was perplexed over the letter, but failed to read it with undoubting clearness, as he had done.

The laird had had a stroke, it was very evident to him—the first of those unerring warnings that come heralding the mighty change. The first, and, perhaps, the next was still far distant; but yet it was that first, which is so surely the beginning of the end. And she did not see it. She was so ignorant, so unsuspicious of the result of events; so unconscious of what might be coming for her, now close and near; what, indeed, lay certainly before her in the way of great and unexpected change.

If the laird died, then George Erskine was the owner of the old Glen house and all around it; and if George inherited, what would too surely be the fate of all?

"Does your father know this?" he said slowly, at length, for he feared to frighten her, and yet could not bear that she should remain so unconscious, so unprepared.

"No, he knows nothing yet; I am just going to send him off the letter. I am so glad you came in to see it, Everett, before five o'clock."

"You have only just time," he said. "I think you ought to send it to him immediately, without losing a post."

"So I will," she answered. "Oh, Everett, I do hope the darling lairdie is not very ill! Oh, how I wish I was up there with them! I should cheer them, you know; and read to him, and sing the songs

he is most fond of, and help Marion to nurse him, and take care of him the whole winter through. Only—ah, dear! how can I leave father?—I cannot let him go off to the Mediterranean alone, and he cannot go to the Glen in winter, you know, Everett. It does hurt his rheumatism so very much."

She had moved to her writing-table as she spoke, and busied herself (while Everett stood watching her from the fire) in closing and sealing up her letter.

Suddenly she took up her pen.

"I will put in one line to papa," she said, "and beg him, if it is possible, to let me go up north and see uncle Lairdie again, just for a little while. I could go so easily, Everett; quite alone, you know, with Fanlie and John."

"How *is* your father?" said Everett presently, and the question was really in

direct answer to her last remark, for he had been reading Miss Erskine's short letter again, and it struck him very forcibly, as he perused it, that the next post, most probably, would bring a summons for Old George Erskine to the Glen. "How would he really stand the journey in this winter weather?" he thought, and so he spoke his thoughts aloud in these questioning words, "How has your father been all these autumn months?"

"Father? Oh, quite well, I think! He has been shooting a great deal, and we have had such large parties at the Arnleighs', and at the Ludlows', and at the Veres'; and, oh, I am so tired of it all, Everett," she continued, suddenly turning round to face him again, and coming back to stand beside him upon the rug.

"Why, what has come to you, Clare?"

He was looking straight at her as he spoke, and she winced under his steady gaze for a moment; then turned slightly from him and looked away into the glowing fire. Her thoughts seemed to wander for an instant; an absent look crept into her eyes; then she brought back her thoughts again and said, still looking away from him into the burning coals—

"I have missed you *so* much, Everett; I am so glad to see you back again."

"I do not feel as if I saw *you* again, Éclair," he answered. "It does not seem to be you somehow, only somebody else."

"What has happened to me?" she said, looking round upon him with a sweet, winsome smile. "Am I not myself?"

"Not the least in the world," he answered, "except in your warm characteristic

welcome of your old friends. There you are unchanged, Éclair, indeed."

"I have often told you," she said, laughing again up at him with what she strove to make her old, bright manner—"I have often told you, and told all my friends, that that is a way in which I never change; and I want to hear of such a friend now, Everett. Tell me something of Percy Bligh," she said.

"Percy? poor old boy! He is not given to change either, Eclair. A couple of months in the rough winds of Norway did not prevail to blow away for him the fairy gossamer web that had wound round his heart. He is in as bad a way as ever, Éclair, so the less you think about him the better, perhaps."

"Dear old Percy! I often think about him," she said. "If I could only help

him; if I could only make him happy again!"

"If you cannot, nobody else can, I am afraid," said Everett, laconically. "So he must be left to fight it out in his own odd way."

"Poor, dear Percy," she repeated; "I cannot get accustomed to doing without him—he is connected in my mind with such numbers of happy days. Tell me, Everett, do you not think that he will ever come and see me again?"

"Not just now, I think," said Everett, and then he turned away from her a little, and paused a moment in meditation, while he picked up his stick and hat.

"I must be going, Éclair," he said.

"Come again, then, Everett."

"Yes, to-morrow," he answered, "I shall be anxious to hear what news you have had from the Glen."

"Yes, do come to-morrow; only——" and she paused, cutting short her sentence and reddening just a little with a faint, sudden flush, as she turned her face away from him once more.

"Only," he repeated, and waited, but she said no more.

Then Everett came close up to her again, as she stood with fingers slowly entwining, and with averted face upon the rug, and, looking wistfully at her for a moment, he said—

"And what have you been doing, Éclair? You have told me nothing of all that has happened since I went away."

She flushed a vivid crimson, this time all over her soft, fair cheek, but the colour faded instantly, and she was quite pale again before she spoke.

"I have nothing to tell you, Everett; I

have been doing nothing, only (since we came from Lady Arnleigh's, you know) I have been staying quite quietly here."

"And have you had no one to keep you company all these dark afternoons? Poor little Éclair! no wonder your sunlight is a little clouded since I saw you two months ago! You have been all solitary, in your little nest here, all these black, foggy days?"

"Papa is away, you know, Everett, but—well," she added, looking bravely and a little defiantly up at him; "now and then I have seen some nice old friend—like you!"

"Friend as true and devoted, I trust. I hope, indeed, that you have many such, Éclair. Good-bye! I will not come to-morrow, unless you send for me. That unexplained 'only' was enough for me. Tell me all about it, Éclair, whenever you are ready and inclined."

"You are quite mistaken, Everett; I have really nothing to tell you," she said; and then he took leave of her, and with a rather heavy heart—because of many things for her sake—went slowly away.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BROTHERS—GONE TOGETHER.

"COME to me! come quickly to me at once, Everett! I have no one to advise me, and I have a terrible letter to-day!"

This message, hastily written in pencilled lines upon a scrap of note paper, was brought to Hardy the next forenoon, fortunately before he had started upon his plans for the day. It was in Clare's writing, and he went at once to answer it by his presence as she desired. What *had* happened he had a very shrewd suspicion and a very clear idea.

There was more news from the Glen, no doubt, this morning; and the truth that had flashed instantly upon him, as he had read Marion's report yesterday afternoon, was now forcing itself upon Clare. She was realizing what he had sadly foreseen. He went off at once to her. Poor child! he thought, as he hurried rapidly along, what a good thing it was he had come up from Hampshire! How strange that he should be the one appointed just now to help her, to stand by as an elder brother, to support her through the trouble that was impending close and near! How curiously placed in the world she was, with no relations within call or reach of her; with so many fair-day friends, and with so few whom she could lean on in an hour of sorrow, or send for at a time of need, save the odd and diversified group of men with whom her father had

surrounded her throughout his wandering and light-hearted days!

What was Old George about, thought Everett, as he stopped at the door in Curzon Street, that he had not come to her at once, at the first whisper of trouble at the Glen?—and where was Verner Carr? She had not mentioned him, save by that distant hint, that to-day she might have some visitors whom she did not wish Everett to disturb.

Poor child! they seemed none of them much fit to take care of her, or to stand between her and any sudden gusts that might come upon her, of the common angry storms of life.

"Thank God!" said Everett gravely to himself as he walked up the stairs "that I came home from Norway, and did not go down to Venice at once, as I had thought

of doing. There are rough days coming, I fear, for our bright Éclair."

He was shown into the drawing-room, as on the day before, but it was empty. Éclair was not in the room, only the big colley occupied the rug by himself this morning, stretching his large brown limbs comfortably before the glowing fire. He was too sleepy even to raise his head to notice Everett, who called to him as he came into the room, "Well, good dog, and how are you?"

"Miss Clare is upstairs, I suppose, sir," said the servant, as he ushered Hardy in. "I will tell her. She is very much upset, sir, by this bit of bad news."

"Eh? Is it very bad, John? The old laird—is he very ill? Has there been another stroke?"

"The laird? Oh, he is very weakly.

That was the report of Miss Erskine's letter this morning; but it is the colonel. What, Mr. Hardy! have you not heard?"

"The colonel?" cried Everett. "Why, no; what do you mean?" he exclaimed. "It was only about her uncle Miss Clare told me yesterday afternoon."

"Oh, it is her father to-day, sir. What! you have not heard? He has had an attack, out shooting, yesterday. It was apoplexy, I fancy; it must be that or something else of the kind."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Hardy in consternation and amazement. "Then it was not about her uncle that Miss Clare wrote to me this morning, after all?"

"Both, sir, I expect; and, indeed, I was not surprised at it. I was scarcely astonished, Mr. Hardy, when, this morning, the letter came. Do you not know the old

saying up there in the Highlands? I have heard it many a time among the people at the Glen. 'The twin-brothers, sir, will go together.' There is an old woman by the bridge above the falls there—I have heard her repeat it many and many a time—'The one will not see the sun set that has risen for the last time upon the other.' No doubt it is coming true, sir; but I am real sorry for our poor young lady. Sit down, Mr. Hardy, and I will tell her you are here."

Everett sat down, indeed quite bewildered by the suddenness of John's communication; by the weird effect, upon his mind and imagination, of the report of this old prophecy of the Moray-Erskines—a people whose family sayings seemed always to come true. And, as he glanced round the little room, his heart was full of sorrow

for the bright, fair girl whom he could remember, such a few short months ago, so happy, so unconscious of death and tears and trouble, fitting up this pretty house for her friends and herself, assisted in her choice of everything by his critical and fastidious taste.

He loved this dainty drawing-room of Clare's. It was a temple consecrated to many pleasant memories, and formed a picture that often floated before his mind in distant and far other scenes—the background always of the figure of Clare, with her frank, limpid eyes and sunny, waving hair.

It was a plainly furnished room, and had few of the flimsy or bagatelle decorations of muslin and ribbons, Cluny lace and gimcrack china, which characterized generally the little doll houses of Belgravia or May-

fair. For the trim simplicity that evinced in Clare's attire the style of her likings was evident here again, tempered and decorated, indeed, by touches of his own. The walls were a soft French grey, well suited to set off the numbers of pretty water-colour drawings that were crowded upon them, from his own pencil and brush, illustrative, all of them, of other times and scenes. The tone of the room, in its furnishings and hangings, was a soft violet; the chairs were few, but all large and low and luxurious; the floor, covered with light Indian matting, above which a beautiful, thick Indian rug, spread before the fireplace, provided warmth and comfort for the colly and the tan. Clare's flowers and book-stands, her piano, and very business-like writing-table, with all the rich and beautiful appointments with which her father loved to provide her,

all evinced the same solid but costly tastes which distinguished everything in Old George's possession, from his daughter's drawing-room to his drag.

"Plain, my dear fellow, certainly, by all means, quite unostentatious, but always the very best of its kind. It is cheaper to give three hundred guineas, my dear boy, for a good horse than a fifty-pound note for one that is not worth his keep."

How many of such characteristic speeches had Everett heard repeated and reiterated here by Old George, in his confidential moods, when he had button-holed some special friend on the hearth-rug, after one of his cosy dinners downstairs! How vividly he could recall the old man, with his gay presence, his brilliant smile, his cool, reckless, lavish, indifferent way of taking all the serious things of life, his

generosity to his friends, and his utter disregard of his creditors! How many a pleasant evening they had spent, as the favoured chosen guests of Old George Erskine, here in his daughter's violet room! and now—what was he to hear about him?

He had time for many thoughts and observations, for all these reminiscences, and for many fears and speculations beside, before Clare came to him. For thought travels rapidly, and memory, helped by associations, sweeps quickly over a vast retrospect at times, and he had passed from point to point over many questions of Clare's future and past history before the door opened and she entered at last.

"Everett, how good of you!"

"Not at all; I am only so thankful that I am in town."

"And so am I. Oh, Everett! what shall

I do? My father—my dear old father and uncle Lairdie both ill; so far away from each other, and both at the very same time. What shall I do? I was just planning to start at once to uncle Lairdie when I have this dreadful news of my father to-day."

"From whom have you heard?" he said. "Sit down, Éclair, and tell me all about it. You look worn and tired. All this is very sudden for you; tell me from whom have you heard? What do they say?"

"I heard first, by the early post, from Marion. See, here is her letter, and I am sure her report is bad enough. I was so distressed at that first, and had made up my mind that, in spite of everything, I would go there. I could not bear her to be in trouble and uncle Lairdie so ill, and still I not to be there; I made up my mind to go to them by the mail to-night, and I had

told Fanlie, and was going to get ready all my things, and had sat down to write to father, Everett, when this dreadful letter from Sir Edward came. Look, Everett, what shall I do? I must not think of uncle Lairdie; I must go to poor father now."

Everett took the second letter from her hand. He had been glancing through Marion's hurried lines as she had been speaking to him, and thinking that they, with all they concealed but implied, contained news that was bad enough; and he had raised his eyes to her face as she concluded, and taken Sir Edward's letter silently from her hand, and paused an instant, even before he looked at it, to scan with tender, sympathetic, and pitying gaze the delicate, tremulous lines of her young face.

How changed she was! how dim was the bright, sunny light of her laughing eyes! how worn! Surely, he thought, this had not all come in one night and day of alarm and sorrow! Had this strange, indescribable look, as if a blight had swept over her, all come since the arrival of Marion's first intelligence from the Glen, only twenty-four hours ago? Or, was there yet another expression in her eyes, beyond the grief and anxiety and bewilderment of her double and sudden grief? Was there not another look of some ceaseless and hidden pain, something besides and behind all this?—some trouble for which he could offer no spoken sympathy nor give any sort of help?

He turned his glance down, after a moment, upon Sir Edward Hartopp's letter.

"My dear young lady," it ran, "do not alarm yourself, for God's sake, I beg of you. I cannot bear to be the teller of bad news. I cannot forgive myself when I think it is to be my hard fate to bring even a passing cloud upon your sunny countenance, a sweet, tender tear to your radiant orbs, and to wring a sigh from your light heart; but I feel a stern and solemn duty impels me, though most unwillingly, to take up my pen and to communicate to you the intelligence that we have our dear friend, the colonel, here an invalid upon our hands. Do not alarm yourself, I entreat you, my dearest young lady. Let me assure you that he will receive here every possible care; that all your own fair hands could do and loving heart suggest shall be done for him; and that, moreover, if your gentle, filial impulse impels you to fly hither to his side,

you will be a welcome and honoured guest in my humble abode. The doctor gives us every hope, I assure you, and things, we may really trust, look well. It was a sudden seizure; I was standing by him in the turnip-field, and a splendid covey had risen just in reach of our guns, and I turned to the colonel to give him the fire, as in my own covers I was in duty bound; and I saw him stagger and reel back, and change colour and fall. Of course, I knew what had happened, for it was just that way poor Lindsay of the Blues went down, at a huge battue at Lord Warmington's, when his grace the late Duke of Saxe-Coburg was on the ground. But, poor George! a better fellow never carried a gun.

Compose yourself, my dear young friend, and forgive me my performance of this painful duty. Rest assured that all the

most assiduous care can do for your father shall be done.

"I am, with many compliments,

"Yours faithfully,

"EDWARD HARTOPP.

"Quentin Court, November 10th."

"Oh, Everett! what do you think of that?" Clare broke out, in a trembling, tearful voice; for Hardy had read the curious epistle aloud, in a low tone, into which uncontrollable concern and dismay had crept as he went on. "Oh, Everett! what do you think of it?"

"He has had a fit, evidently," said Everett. "Poor old colonel! How confusedly Sir Edward puts it all! What an idiotic letter! but I fear there is no doubt about it, Éclair."

"But a fit!—what kind of a fit do you

suppose it is?—very bad, Everett, do you think? Oh! you do *not* think there is any danger for him?" she cried.

"It is impossible to say, Éclair," he answered sadly. "But it is very perplexing and strange. Had he heard of his brother's illness, do you know?"

"No; I am sure not. There was no one who would have written to him. Marion had not the least idea where he was, you see, for we have been moving about just lately so much, from house to house, and she only wrote here yesterday, to me. Oh, Everett! do you think it is very bad?"

"It looks bad," he said presently, again. "I am very sorry, Éclair. What would you like to do? Shall I go down this afternoon to Quentin and telegraph to you as soon as I get there?"

"Oh, Everett, I must go myself," she replied.

"Would you wish it? Very well," he answered. "Then I will telegraph to say you are coming, and I will go down with you, Éclair, to-night."

"Will you? Oh, you good, dear, faithful Everett! What a friend to me you have been! what should I do without you! Does it not seem strange, I feel so alone now that trouble has come upon me? Surely all other girls are not placed just as I am, Everett, do you think they are?"

"All have to act for themselves sooner or later, I expect, Éclair, and I am sure none have more faithful friends than are ready to act for you."

"No, I am sure not; I have so many. Oh, you have every one of you always been so kind to me, and I am glad *you* have come back to me just now. Look, Everett, let us write a telegram. We will send John with

it immediately, and say I will be at Quentin to-night. My poor, dear father, and then uncle Lairdie! Oh, how I wish I could be with both of them at once!"

"The laird has your cousin," said Everett, rising to walk with her to the writing-table. "If you will go to either, Éclair, I think I agree with you, that you should consider your father first. Poor, dear old George!" he added again. He glanced down once more upon Sir Edward's communication, and then he shook his head. "Look here, Éclair," he said, suddenly, "Will you let me go down first and see if your father does really want you? It may not be so very bad, and it is only a house full of men down there, you know."

"Yes, yes, I know all that; but, Everett, if my father is really ill, oh, I should like to go to him," she said. "I might read to

him and amuse him, so much, you know, if he is obliged to stay in bed."

"Humph!" said Everett, laconically, and then he paused a moment, scarcely knowing what further he should say. "I do not think it is that kind of illness, you know. I do not judge so, at least, from Sir Edward's letter."

"You think he is not laid up in bed, then?" she persisted.

"I am sure, Éclair," he answered, in a despairing tone; "I am sure I cannot tell, but do let me go down first, and see, at least see, before you come, how things really are. I could write back, or telegraph, and tell you everything then," he added, in a persuasive tone.

"Oh, Everett, do you think I ought?"

She had sat down at her writing-table during the last few words, and had

drawn her blotting-book towards her to write the telegram. She paused before she wrote it, and looked up to gain an answer, and to gather counsel from his face, and she saw that his eyes, in their thoughtful and considerate gaze, had wandered from her face and from Sir Edward's letter (which he still held open in his hand), and that they had fixed themselves, half-consciously, upon an envelope that lay with the address upwards on the corner of the table just where he stood. It was addressed in clear, well-formed letters; he could not help reading Clare's name and direction, even in one passing glance, and the firm handwriting was one he knew. It was a large, square envelope, and it bore a foreign post-mark, and a French Imperial stamp. His eyes rested but for one moment, and then were raised to hers. A deep flush had swept

rapidly over her cheeks, as it had done yesterday, when he had distantly approached Verner Carr's unuttered name. As then, it left her paler and more tired-looking than before, and with a curious, restless, embarrassed expression, combating the deep concern and grave sorrow upon her face.

She took up the letter, however, in her firm, little, white hand, and looked straight at him, not avoiding the subject any longer, and regaining in a few seconds her composure and self-control.

"Major Carr is in Paris," she said. "Do you recognize his writing? I almost thought he was coming over, and that I should have had a visit from him to-day."

"Oh, indeed," said Everett, quietly, answering her words with a matter-of-course composure in his manner, instantly rivalling her own. "I have not seen Carr for a good

while, but yet I recognized his writing just now. He is in Paris, is he?"

"Yes, his friend, Mrs. Raymond Paget, you know, has an apartment there."

"Indeed!"

Then there was a pause again. Clare had evidently nothing further to announce to him, or, if she had, she did not mean to announce it then; so he turned away a little after a few minutes as she quietly laid her letter down again, without any further remark. But he was thinking fast and sadly for her, sighing in his kind, deep heart, over the complications of her curious position; over her solitude—the solitude so unguarded and uncontrolled, in which circumstances had left her here, as in many another place before now (while her father shot, hunted, raced, or in any other way amused himself), and she had been left to choose friends and associates as she pleased.

"Is Lady Arnleigh in town?" he said, presently.

"No, Everett; why?"

"Only I should like to have seen her," he said.

"Oh, she is never in town, you know, at this time of year. They are shooting the covers in Herefordshire, and, of course, Lady Arnleigh is entertaining his lordship's friends; but I will tell her you asked for her, Everett. I had a letter from her yesterday, and must write her a line at once, if I can."

"Yes, do," said Everett, decidedly. "Tell her about your father and the laird—tell her you are here, Éclair, and that—well, that I have gone down to Quentin to-day, and that I will write to her from there."

"No, Everett, I will not write that to her, for the best of reasons—it would not

be true, for I have made up my mind that I shall go down with you myself."

"Will you? very well, then," he replied. "Then I will accompany you, as I said. Will you be ready, Éclair, by three o'clock?"

"Is that the first train?" she asked.

"Yes, the first express to Wales; the other went down this morning at ten. But that will take us to Quentin by bed-time, so I will come round for you, Éclair, if you will be ready then."

"Very well," she said, "so it be; I will order the carriage at three."

"It is a bad business," Everett said to himself, as he went out and walked along the dusky streets to his own little rooms—"it is a very bad business, and I see pretty well, in one way, how it is going to end.

Oh, bother those Highland prophecies! Fancy, the two poor old gentlemen at once! —the fine old laird and George. God bless me, it is a very sad business! and how Éclair will take it all, Heaven knows! And Verner has got his finger in still, I see—worse luck to him! I should like to have a glimpse of that correspondence. The slippery fish! I wonder what he has found out about the inheritance, and in what direction he is playing his game? Confound them all—Raymond Pagets and the whole nasty lot of them! They might amuse themselves in their own way for me, if they would only let my Éclair alone. God help her, my pretty little queen! There are dark December days, I fear, coming quickly for her. I will stand by her, however, and dare take my oath on it she can trust to Percy, too."

At three o'clock Everett was at Curzon Street again. There had been no further news, but Clare was packed and ready, and the carriage to take them to the station stood waiting at the door.

She looked still more tired and anxious than she had done in the morning, for she had had much writing to do—a long letter of anxious sympathy and concern to Marion; a few lines of sad intelligence to Lady Arnleigh; and perhaps an answer that had cost her some perplexity and consideration, to that epistle from Paris as well. And she looked very tired, and stepped slowly into the carriage with a languid and dejected air.

They drove swiftly to the Great Western Station—Fanlie and Everett, and all Clare's small etceteras of travel, in the carriage; John following, or to follow im-

mediately, with the heavier luggage in a cab. As they reached the station, Everett sprang instantly to the ground.

"I fancy we have only just caught the train," he said. "Shall I take the tickets, Éclair?"

"Why should you have the trouble?" she answered. "Where is John? he always takes them; he is quite accustomed to travelling in charge of Fanlie and me. Where is he?" And she paused and looked hurriedly round for the cab,—supposed to be following them,—as she paused at the station door.

The carriage drew up and waited a little on one side. Mademoiselle Fanlie busied herself in getting all her packages about her. They were numerous and remarkable, as usual, and could not possibly be carried until John made his appearance

to convey them and her to the railway carriage, and to find her a place. They all waited.

"We have not five minutes," exclaimed Everett. "What can have kept him? Did he not know the way? Has he gone to the wrong station? No! Halloa! that is all right, by Jove! We will just do it. Here he is!"

And the four-wheeled cab, high-laden with luggage, turned dexterously into the court-yard of the huge station as he spoke. John sat on the box, as they had expected of him. He was clad in his long livery coat, as usual, carefully gloved and cravated, ready for winter travel; and he looked grave as he drove up to the station, for something had delayed him. He held a large yellow envelope in his hand.

"Here you are, John! Look alive!"

shouted Hardy. "Halloa!" he continued, as the man sprang to the ground, "what has kept you? What have you there?"

"A telegram, please sir," said the servant, touching his hat, and throwing a hasty, anxious glance into Everett's face. "A telegram for Miss Clare, sir. It was that kept me back for a moment. Arrived just as I was coming away."

"A telegram!" Clare caught it from his hand before Everett could intercept it. "For me?" She tore open the thin, yellow envelope, and the pink paper, with its swift-winged message, was in another instant open in her trembling hands. They stood breathless and watched her. One glance was enough.

"Oh, Everett!" she cried, with a low, passionate wail. "Oh, Everett! my father, my poor father!"

But she could utter no more. The light faded swiftly from her eyes; her cheek paled to the whiteness of the drifting snow. She glanced once upwards, with a piteous, stricken gaze, into Everett's anxious, eager face, and then the paper fell from her hand. She seemed quietly and slowly to droop forward, as if she would sink upon the cold pavement upon her face. But Everett's arms were instantly round her, and her head sank upon his shoulder as she fainted dead away. He glanced once with grave, sorrowful eyes at the telegram.

"And so that is the end of it," he said. "Poor child! I will carry her to the carriage, John. She will soon come round again. But there is no use in going down to Quentin now."

CHAPTER XIV.

VERNER'S CHANCE.

VERNER had been in Paris for a fortnight. He had been obliged to go. Mrs. Raymond Paget's little pressing notes were no longer to be resisted. He had promised her a fortnight in November, and he had felt obliged to obey. Besides, it had suited him pretty well to go just then. He had been hanging about Clare's neighbourhood again, at several county-house visits during October, and in London for the first week she was there; and he had not yet made

up his mind about anything, so he felt it safest for him to go.

He always found that that peculiar, friendship which he had managed to establish with Clare was best maintained by short separations, by unexpected leaving, and by quick returns; and he wished to maintain it just quietly as it was until the result of affairs had declared themselves, and until it was clearly known who would have the inheritance of the Moray-Erskines of the Glen,—whether the colonel's impatient creditors or her! He understood now better how things stood, and perceived undoubtedly, from all he had gathered in the Highlands, that it behoved him to watch and wait. So he had waited, keeping that subtle, close hold he had acquired upon Clare—upon her thoughts, and upon her fancy, if not, indeed, upon her heart. He managed

to interest and to worry her, to excite her feelings towards himself, and to leave her constantly in a state of bewilderment and dismay; to keep alive in her heart that curious longing for his presence, that inexplicable sense of pleasure she always experienced when she saw him return, and that wistful thrill of pain with which she always saw him leave her—with his eager insinuations still unexplained.

He had left her thus to go to Paris, where Mrs. Raymond Paget had a charming little *étage* in the Rue St. Jean. And he had written to her from there, saying how much he missed her, his sweet, bright friend; and how dull the bright Paris days seemed to be to him without his daily visit to the house in Curzon Street; and how little heart he had to enjoy anything that kept him from London just now. London, in Novem-

ber fogs, he remarked, was to him just then a Paradise brighter and more attractive than the fairest spot of Europe to which he might journey "beneath the blue *céleste* and the radiant sunshine of a foreign sky." So he was coming back to London, he said, directly. Should he find his sweet friend there?

He missed the answer to that letter somehow; or, as he was staying with Mrs. Raymond Paget, some mishap may have overtaken it, perhaps through her servants, or some other intercepting agent, on its way from the *facteur's* square box to his room. Mischance may easily befall a letter! Certainly that one never reached his hands. So it happened that it was not until some days after that interrupted journey of poor Clare to Quentin, that Verner (as he and Mrs. Raymond waited for the first

course of their dinner one night at the Café Anglais) idly scanned the English paper, and read there an announcement which caused him to start violently and utter loud exclamations of surprise.

"'On the 10th inst., at Quentin Court, Monmouthshire, suddenly, Brevet-Colonel George Moray-Erskine, late of the Carbineers, in the seventy-first year of his age.' By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Five days ago!"

And without one more word of explanation, he sprang from his chair, turned his back upon the little dinner-table,—hastily seized hold of his coat and hat again, and simultaneously drew out his watch.

"What *is* the matter?" exclaimed Mrs. Raymond, in profound amazement and consternation.

"By Jove!" he repeated. "It is half-past seven o'clock. I can catch the mail, but there is not a minute to lose. Dinner! oh, never mind, I will get something at the station."

"But what is the matter? Is there bad news, my dear friend? Have you taken leave of your senses?" she exclaimed.

"Bad news!" he almost shouted. "Why, it is the very best news conceivable. The very best thing I could hear or read. Old Erskine dead! Poor old chap! And gone off so suddenly too, down at Hartopp's, there, with no fuss about it, and no trouble to any one."

"Colonel Erskine? Verner! old Colonel Erskine dead?" and Mrs. Raymond seized hold of the paper, and while Verner hurried into his great coat, she read the announcement for herself. "Well!"

"Well, I am off," he repeated. "Oh, hang it, Violet, don't bother a fellow beyond all limits of endurance," he exclaimed, as he saw signs of pathetic remonstrance gathering in Mrs. Raymond's dark eyes. "Why, he owed me heaps and heaps of money, and, don't you see, I must be off at once to put in my claim with the first, otherwise I will not see a shilling, not a farthing of it, by Jove!"

"I may believe as much of that as I like," said Mrs. Raymond Paget, with pouting lip and tearful eye.

"Certainly, believe just what you like, my dear friend," he answered, excitedly, for the news he had had was whirling through his brain like draughts of intoxicating wine. "Believe what you like, only wish me good luck, Violet, for I am off to London at once."

He did stay to put her into the carriage, however, and sent her off, very angry and disconsolate, to join Mr. Raymond Paget over his solitary and most undomestic dinner at home; and that hesitation cost Verner that evening's train. He cursed Mrs. Raymond Paget in an emphatic style, as he had often before had good reason to apostrophize her, and he did not go back for consolation to her house.

He slept at the station that night, sending a message to the Rue St. Jean, however, for his servant and his things, and next morning he went off by the earliest express.

Arrived in London and driving up from the station, it struck him suddenly, just as he passed his club, that he would go in and fetch his letters; also that he would have a bit of dinner before doing anything further, for he had fared badly the night before, and

he wished for a little rest and refreshment while he matured his plans. So he went in, sending on his servant to his Burlington Street rooms.

He expected to find no one in the club; for it was fine hunting weather in the country, and an empty time in town, but at the very moment he entered the large dining-room, his name was called out from the nearest table to the left of him, and he turned round, to see Charlie Keith eating a solitary repast.

"Halloa, Carr! How are you? Where have you come from, I should like to know?"

"Halloa, Charlie! Is that you? How do you do? I have just come from Paris."

"Have you? Come along, then, and give me all the *parley vous* news. Come and feed with me here, Verner. I have only just begun."

"Shall I? Very well, then, all right. Another dinner!" called Verner to the club waiter, and then he took his place opposite Keith at his little table in a snug corner apart.

"Well, this sad news about all the old Erskine lot?" said Keith. "You have been out of the way, Carr, haven't you, all the time?"

"I have, indeed. Never heard of it till last night, when I saw the announcement in the *Galignani*, and saw that it was five days old. By Jove! I was awfully sorry. Tell us all about it, Charlie. I know nothing but the simple fact—but what the paper gave."

"Well, poor George, he went toes up very suddenly, did he not? quite unexpected —game old boy, that he was! He was shooting in a turnip-field at Quentin, and

Hartopp was not ten yards away from him, when down he went in a blue fit in two seconds, and he never rightly came round again. He died the next evening. Poor old fellow! I suspect he had a deal of bother all on the top of him, that nobody knew anything about; and some scoundrelly chaps had been down there at Quentin, to have a worry at him; and no one knows what came off exactly, but they shot him right ahead into the next world between them, a good deal faster than they looked for; for, by Jove! they are nicely done now. They will never get a shilling, you know. Éclair has got every farthing of it, as safe as a bank. By gad! she is a big prize, Verner, for somebody now!" Charlie went on, as he sipped his wine and glanced with a furtive scrutiny into Major Carr's face. "You would not have thought the

fine old laird would have followed his brother so soon?"

"The laird!" exclaimed Verner, putting down his knife and fork, and staring, speechless with amazement, into Charlie's cool face. "The laird! What, in Heaven's name, do you mean, Keith?" he said.

"Have you not heard? By jingo! Carr, you are 'out of it' altogether; why, the laird is dead too, man. They were twins, you know; they had a sharp run of it out of the world together, just as they had coming in, and George won in the last race, and was first by a day at the finish, though he had the bad luck to be the second, seventy years ago, at the other end."

"The laird is dead?" repeated Verner, in quite bewildered and incredulous tones.

"Yes, and a fine old boy he was. I am sorry for him, and for George, too, for the

matter of that. I was down at Quentin, you know, when it happened, but, of course, the party broke up. I stayed and helped a bit, for there were lots of things for Hartopp to do, and it lay heavy on the old 'beau' to arrange it all. But they whisked the poor colonel off up to Scotland, in no time, so we were done with him; and as there was nothing more to do, you know, and as the party broke up—well, I came up to town. I waited to see what Hardy was going to do, about going north for the two funerals,—they are to come off together on Monday, you know, at the Glen—and, besides, I wanted to hear something of poor Éclair."

"Well!" said Verner, hastily, "and what have you heard of her?"

"Oh, she is in town; they would not let her go north. She was too much cut up—too much knocked down, I mean—for

the journey. Hardy has been looking after her, but he and Percy are both off to Scotland to-night. It is a rum business altogether, is it not? And now our bonnie Princess Éclair is the biggest proprietress from John o' Groat's House to the Tweed, and she has the estate, clean and clear, too, of all Old George's debts. By Jove! it was a chance, you know. I understand all about it now. If George had succeeded, he was last heir in entail, and the Jews would have got every stiver. They say his liabilities would have sunk the estate; he would have had to sell it immediately. Only fancy it! every yard of that glorious old glen. But now, Clare has come in, and she is the last heir in entail, and it is all hers, everything of it, and she has not one bit of responsibility in her father's debts—not legally, you know, and of course

she does not know anything about them, and nobody is likely to tell her now. But, by jingo! Carr, the Israelites are furious, and lots of other kinds of fellows, too; and they are saying beastly hard things all over the place about Old George, and taking away every shred of character or honour the poor old chap ever possessed."

"That does not much matter," said Verner, cheerfully. "The property is saved from them; and that, after all, is the point."

"Yes; but it goes against me, awfully, to hear it," said Charlie, "when you think of the poor old boy. He was not a bad fellow at any time, Verner, and the kindest-hearted old governor in his latter days that you could wish to see; and, by Jove! if I could afford to throw away a few 'thous' on sentiment, I would let those

baying wolves of Israel have them, on his account, just to stop their cursed mouths a bit, and to bolster up a reputation for the memory of Old George. I would, indeed I would, just for the sake of old, jolly days."

Verner laughed a low cynical laugh, in his quiet way to himself. "Thous' are not so plentiful, I fear, as all that, Charlie," he said.

"No! worse luck to it! I need all my loose property to throw to the ravening creatures for myself," said Keith, sighing, indeed, but with a light and very indifferent sigh. "So that is the news for you, Verner, my boy—and now I must say good-night to you, for I must go and drink tea with my mamma."

"Good night," Verner answered, in an absent manner, and then, as Keith left

him, he sat still for a few minutes, lost in a labyrinth of absolutely bewildering thoughts.

Then gradually his brain cleared, he saw all the facts distinctly and plain. He drew his breath with a quick, eager gesture of intense satisfaction, and his eyes glistened with almost greedy impatience, as he fixed them on the centre of the table upon the soft glowing light. "Luck!" he whispered. "By Heavens! what a stroke of inconceivable luck! *Profitez, profitez du temps!* Catch the turn in the tide; strike the ready iron; do not lose a moment; seize your luck while you can trap it! Go in, and win!"

END OF VOL. II.

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